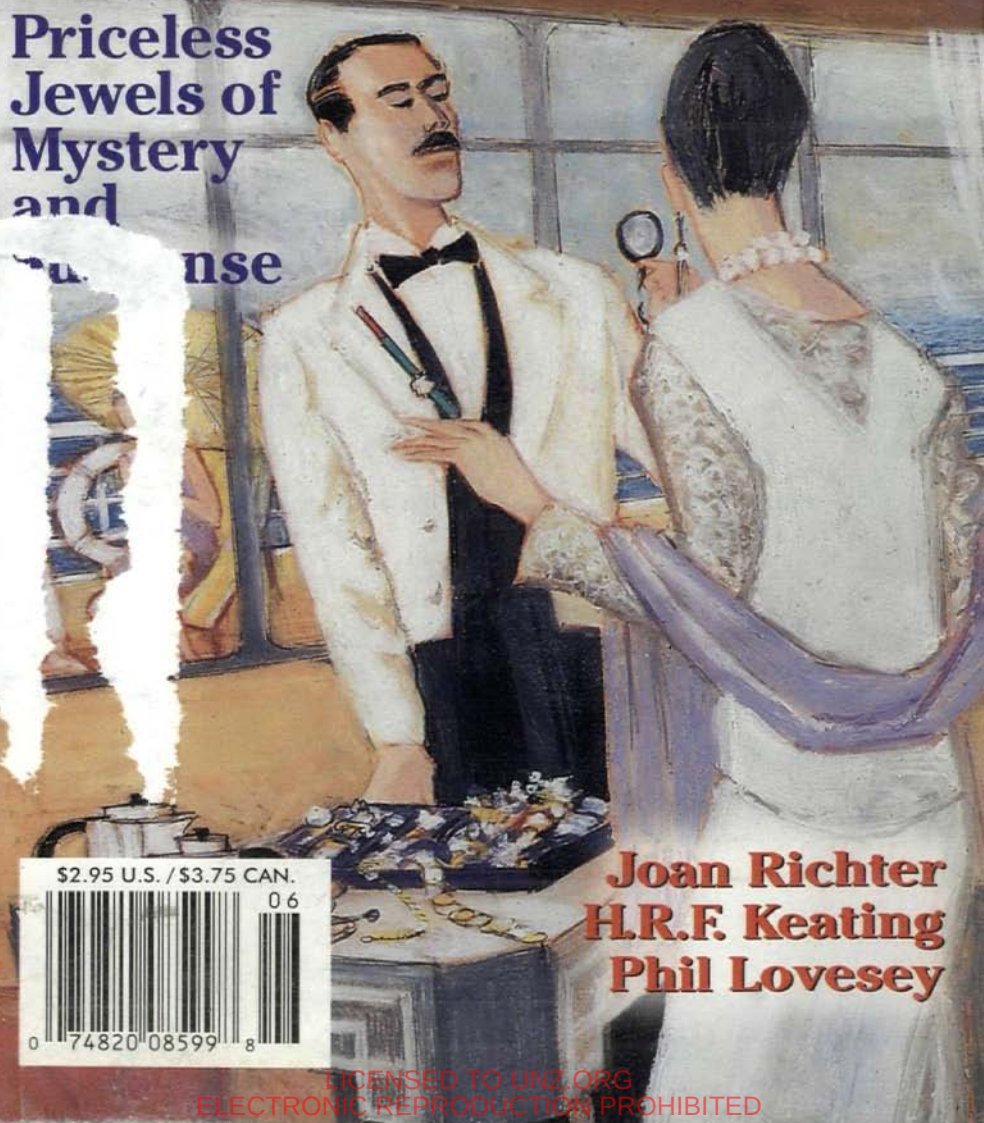


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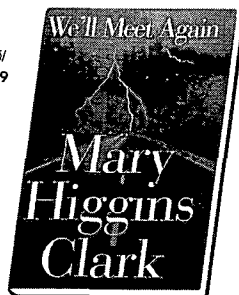
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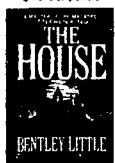
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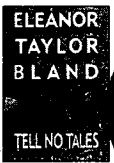
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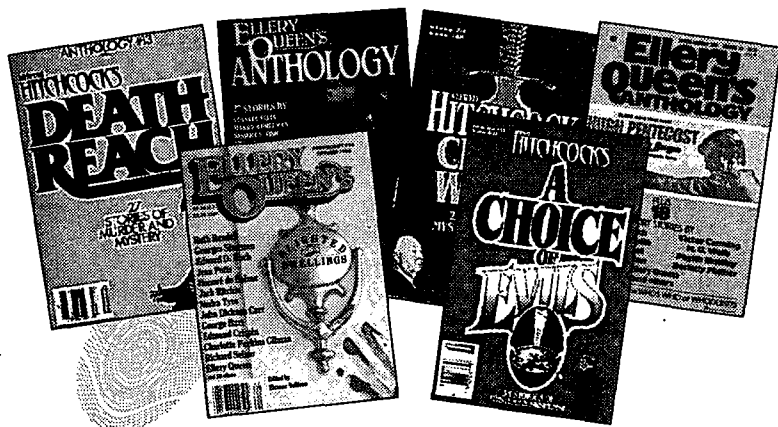
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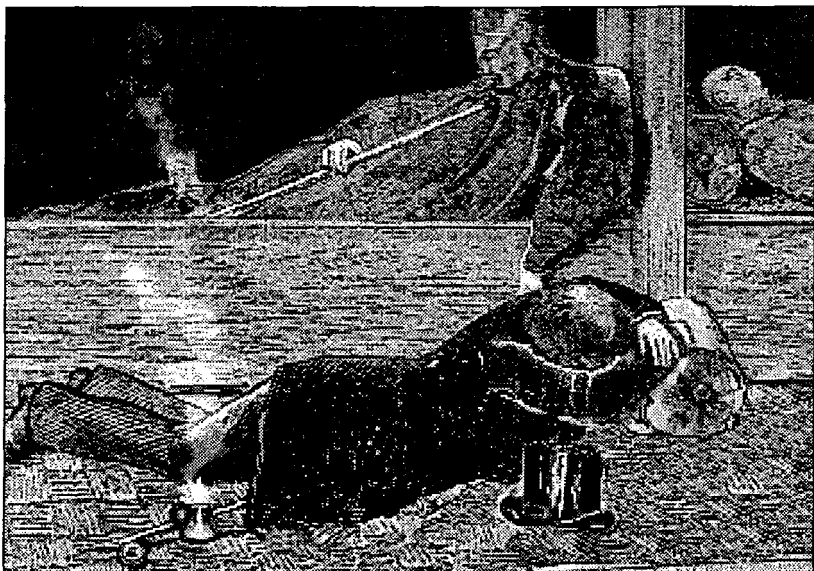
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THE HIGHBINDERS

by Bill Pronzini

In his twenty years as a detective Quincannon had visited a great many strange and sinister places, but this May night was his first time in an opium den. And not just one—four of them, so far. Four too many.

Blind Annie's Cellars, this one was called. Another of the reputed three hundred such resorts that infested the dark heart of San Francisco's Chinatown. Located in Ross Alley, it was a foul-smelling cave full of scurrying cats and yellowish-blue smoke that hung in ribbons and layers. The smoke seemed to move lumpily, limp at the ends; its thick-sweet odor, not unlike that of burning orange peel, turned Quincannon's seldom-tender stomach for the fourth straight time.

"The gentleman want to smoke?"

The question came in a scratchy singsong from a rag-encased crone seated on a mat just inside the door. On her lap was a tray laden with nickels—the price of admittance. Quincannon said, "No, I'm looking for someone," and added a coin to the litter in the tray. The old woman nodded and grinned, revealing toothless gums. It

was a statement, he thought sourly, she had heard a hundred times before. Blind Annie's, like the other three he'd entered, was a democratic resort that catered to Caucasian "dude fiends"—well-dressed ladies and diamond-studded gentlemen—as well as to Chinese woolies with twenty-cent *yenshee* habits. Concerned friends and relatives would come looking whenever one of these casual, and in many cases not so casual, hop-smokers failed to return at an appointed time.

Quincannon moved deeper into the lamp-streaked gloom. Tiers of bunks lined both walls, each outfitted with nut-oil lamp, needle, pipe, bowl, and supply of *ah pin yin*. All of the bunks in the nearest tier were occupied. Most smokers lay still, carried to sticky slumber by the black stuff in their pipes. Only one was Caucasian, a man who lay propped on one elbow, smiling fatuously as he held a lichee-nut shell of opium over the flame of his lamp. It made a spluttering, hissing noise as it cooked. Quincannon stepped close enough to determine that the man wasn't James Scarlett, then turned toward the far side of the den.

And there, finally, he found his quarry.

The young attorney lay motionless on one of the lower bunks at the rear, his lips shaping words as if he were chanting some song to himself. Quincannon shook him, slapped his face. No response. Scarlett was a serious addict; he regularly "swallowed a cloud and puffed out fog," as the Chinese said, and escaped for hours, sometimes days, deep inside his pipe dreams.

"You're a blasted fool, all right," Quincannon told the deaf ears. "This is the last section of the city you should've ventured into on this night. It's a wonder you're not dead already." He took a grip on the attorney's rumpled frock coat, hauled him around and off the bunk. There was no protest as he hoisted the slender body over his shoulder.

He was halfway to the door with his burden when his foot struck one of the darting cats. It yowled and clawed at his leg, pitching him off balance. He reeled, cursing, against one of the bunks, dislodged a lamp from its edge; the glass chimney shat-

The setting is 1890's San Francisco. The characters an utterly believable P.I. duo. The female half of the team, Sabina Carpenter, acquired her skills through her deceased husband, who was a Pinkerton detective. Partner John Quincannon is a former U. S. Secret Service agent. Eight more stories in the series appear in a collection published by Crippen & Landru Publishers, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505. ¶

tered on impact, splashing oil and wick onto the filthy floor matting. The flame that sprouted was thin, shaky; the lack of oxygen in the room kept it from flaring high and spreading. Quincannon stamped out the meager fire and then strained over at the waist, righted the lamp with his free hand. When he stood straight again he heard someone giggle, someone else begin to sing in a low tone. None of the pipers whose eyes were still open paid him the slightest attention. Neither did the smiling crone by the door.

He shifted Scarlett's inert weight on his shoulder. "Opium fiends, tong rivalry, body snatching," he muttered as he staggered past the hag. "Bah, what a case!"

Outside he paused to breathe deeply several times. The cold night air cleared his lungs of the *ah pin yin* smoke and restored his equilibrium. It also roused Scarlett somewhat from his stupor. He stirred, mumbled incoherent words, but his body remained flaccid in Quincannon's grasp.

Nearby, a streetlamp cast a feeble puddle of light; farther down Ross Alley, toward Jackson Street where the hired buggy and driver waited, a few strings of paper lanterns and the glowing brazier of a lone sidewalk food seller opened small holes in the darkness. It was late enough, nearing midnight, so that few pedestrians were abroad. Not many law-abiding Chinese ventured out at this hour. Nor had in the past fifteen years, since the rise of the murderous tongs in the early 'eighties. The Quarter's nights belonged to the hop-smokers and fan-tan gamblers, the slave-girl prostitutes ludicrously called "flower willows," and the *boo how doy*, the tongs' paid hatchet men.

Quincannon carried his burden toward Jackson, his footsteps echoing on the rough cobbles. James Scarlett mumbled again, close enough to Quincannon's ear and with enough lucidity for the words—and the low, fearful tone in which he uttered them—to be distinguishable.

"Fowler Alley," he said.

"What's that, my lad?"

A moan. Then something that might have been "blue shadow."

"Not out here tonight," Quincannon grumbled. "They're all black as the devil's fundament."

Ahead he saw the buggy's driver hunched fretfully on the seat, one hand holding the horse's reins and the other tucked inside his coat, doubtless resting on the handle of a revolver. Quincannon had had to pay him handsomely for this night's work—too handsomely to suit his thrifty Scots nature, even though he would see to it that Mrs. James Scarlett paid the expense. If it had not been for the fact that highbinders almost never preyed on Caucasians, even a pile of greenbacks wouldn't have been enough to bring the driver into Chinatown at midnight.

Twenty feet from the corner, Quincannon passed the lone food seller huddled over his brazier. He glanced at the man, noted the black coolie blouse with its drooping sleeves, the long queue, the head bent and shadow-hidden beneath a black slouch hat surmounted by a topknot. He shifted his gaze to the buggy again, took two more steps—

Coolie food sellers don't wear slouch hats . . . one of the badges of the highbinder . . .

The sudden thought caused him to break stride and turn awkwardly under Scarlett's weight, his hand groping beneath his coat for the holstered Navy Colt. The Chinese was already on his feet. From inside one sleeve he had drawn a long-barreled revolver; he aimed and fired before Quincannon could free his weapon.

The bullet struck the limp form of James Scarlett, made it jerk and slide free. The gunman fired twice more, loud reports in the close confines of the alley, but Quincannon was already falling sideways, his feet torn from under him by the attorney's toppling weight. Both slugs missed in the darkness, one singing in ricochet off the cobbles.

Quincannon struggled out from under the tangle of Scarlett's arms and legs. As he lurched to one knee he heard the retreating thud of the highbinder's footfalls. Heard, too, the rattle and slap of harness leather and bit chains, the staccato beat of horse's hooves as the buggy driver whipped out of harm's way. The gunman was a dim figure racing diagonally across Jackson. By the time Quincannon gained his feet, the man had vanished into the black maw of Ragpickers' Alley.

Fury drove Quincannon into giving chase even though he knew it was futile. Other narrow passages opened off Ragpickers'—Bull Run, Butchers' Alley with its clotted smells of poultry and fish. It was a maze made for the *boo how doy*; if he tried to navigate it in the dark, he was liable to become lost—or worse, leave himself wide open for ambush. The wisdom of this finally cooled his blood, slowed him to a halt ten rods into the lightless alleyway. He stood listening, breathing through his mouth. He could still hear the assassin's footfalls, but they were directionless now, fading. Seconds later, they were gone.

Quickly he returned to Jackson Street. The thoroughfare was empty, the driver and his rig long away. Ross Alley appeared deserted, too, but he could feel eyes peering at him from behind curtains and glass. The highbinder's brazier still burned; in its orange glow James Scarlett was a motionless bulk on the cobbles where he'd fallen. Quincannon went to one knee, probed with fingers that grew wet with blood. One bullet had entered the middle of the attorney's back, shattering the spine and no doubt killing him instantly.

If the Kwong Dock tong was responsible for this, Quincannon thought grimly, war between them and the Hip Sing could erupt at any time. The theft of Bing Ah Kee's corpse was bad enough, but the murder of a Hip Sing shyster—and a white man at that—was worse because of the strong threat of retaliation by police raiders and mobs of Barbary Coast and Tar-Flat toughs. All of Chinatown, in short, was a powder keg with a lighted fuse.

The Hall of Justice, an imposing gray stone pile at Kearney and Washington streets, was within stampeding distance of the Chinese Quarter. Quincannon had never felt comfortable inside the building. For one thing, he'd had a run-in or two with the city's constabulary, who did not care to have their thunder stolen by a private investigator who was better at their job than they were. For another thing, police corruption had grown rampant in recent times. Just last year there had been a departmental shakeup in which several officers and Police Clerk William E. Hall were discharged. Chief Crowley claimed all the bad apples had been removed and the barrel was now clean, but Quincannon remained sceptical.

He hid his edginess from the other three men present in the chief's office by carefully loading and lighting his favorite briar. One of the men he knew well enough, even grudgingly respected; this was Lieutenant William Price, head of the Chinatown "flying squad" that had been formed in an effort to control tong crime. He had mixed feelings about Crowley, and liked Sergeant Adam Gentry, Price's assistant, not at all. Gentry was contentious and made no bones about his distaste for flycops.

Short and wiry, a rooster of a man in his gold-buttoned uniform, Gentry watched with a flinty gaze as Quincannon shook out the sulphur match. "Little Pete's behind this, sure as hell. No one else in Chinatown would have the audacity to order the shooting of a white man."

"So it would seem," Quincannon allowed.

"Seem? That bloody devil controls every tong in the Quarter except the Hip Sing."

This was an exaggeration. Fong Ching, alias F.C. Peters, alias Little Pete, was a powerful man, no question—a curious mix of East and West, honest and crooked. He ran several successful businesses, participated in both Chinatown and city politics, and was cultured enough to write Chinese stage operas, yet he ruled much of Chinatown crime with such cleverness that he had never been prosecuted. But his power was limited to a few sin-and-vice tongs. Most tongs were law-abiding, self-governing, and benevolent.

Quincannon said, "The Hip Sing is Pete's strongest rival, I'll grant you that."

"Yes, and he's not above starting a bloodbath in Chinatown to gain control of it. He's a menace to white and yellow alike."

"Not so bad as that," Price said. "He already controls the black-mail, extortion, and slave-girl rackets, and the Hip Sing is no threat to him there. Gambling is their game, and under Bing Ah Kee there was never any serious trouble between them. That won't change much under the new president, Mock Don Yuen, though it could if that sneaky son of his, Mock Quan, ever takes over."

"Pete's power-mad," Gentry argued. "He wants the whole of Chinatown in his pocket."

"But he's not crazy. He might order the snatching of Bing's remains—though even the Hip Sing aren't convinced he's behind that business or there'd have been war declared already—but I can't see him risking the public execution of a white man, not for any reason. He knows it'd bring us down on him and his high-binders with a vengeance. He's too smart by half to allow that to happen."

"I say he's not. There's not another man in that rat-hole of vice who'd dare to do it."

Quincannon said, "Hidden forces at work, mayhap?"

"Not bloody likely."

"No, it's possible," Price said. He ran a forefinger across his thick moustache. He was a big man, imposing in both bulk and countenance; he had a deserved reputation in Chinatown as the "American Terror," the result of raiding parties he'd led into the Quarter's dens of sin. "I've had a feeling that there's more than meets the eye and ear in Chinatown these days. Yet we've learned nothing to corroborate it."

"Well, I don't care which way the wind is blowing over there," the chief said. "I don't like this damned shooting tonight." Crowley was an overweight sixty, florid and pompous. Politics was his game; his policeman's instincts were suspect, a failing which sometimes led him to rash judgment and action. "The *boo how do*y have always left Caucasians strictly alone. Scarlett's murder sets a deadly precedent and I'm not going to stand by and do nothing about it."

Gentry had lighted a cigar; he waved it for emphasis as he said, "Bully! Finish off Little Pete and his gang before he has more innocent citizens murdered, that's what I say."

"James Scarlett wasn't innocent," Price reminded him. "He sold his soul to the Hip Sing for opium, defended their hatchet men in court. And he had guilty knowledge of the theft of Bing's corpse,

possibly even a hand in the deed, according to what Quincannon has told us."

"According to what Scarlett's wife told my partner and me," Quincannon corrected, "though she said nothing of an actual involvement in the body snatching. Only that he had knowledge of the crime and was in mortal fear of his life. Whatever he knew, he kept it to himself. He never spoke of Little Pete or the Kwong Dock to Mrs. Scarlett."

"They're guilty as sin, just the same," Gentry said. "By God, the only way to ensure public safety is to send the flying squad out to the tong headquarters and Pete's hangouts. Axes, hammers, and pistols will write their epitaphs in a hurry."

"Not yet," Price said. "Not without proof."

"Well, then, why don't we take the squad and find some? Evidence that Pete's behind the killing. Evidence to point to the cold storage where old Bing's bones are stashed."

"Pete's too clever to leave evidence for us to find."

"He is, but maybe his highbinders aren't."

"The sergeant has a good point," Chief Crowley said. "Will, take half a dozen men and go over those places with a fine-tooth comb. And don't take any guff from Pete and his highbinders while you're about it."

"Just as you say, Chief." Price turned to his assistant. "Round up an interpreter and assemble the men we'll need."

"Right away." Gentry hurried from the office.

Quincannon asked through a cloud of pipe smoke, "What do you know of Fowler Alley, Lieutenant?"

"Fowler Alley? Why do you ask that?"

"Scarlett mumbled the name after I carried him out of Blind Annie's. I wonder if it might have significance."

"I can't imagine how. Little Pete hangs out at his shoe factory on Bartlett Alley and Bartlett is where the Kwong Dock Company is located, too. I know there are no tongs headquartered in Fowler Alley. And no illegal activity."

"Are any of the businesses there run by Pete?"

"Not to my knowledge. I'll look into it."

Quincannon nodded, thinking: Not before I do, I'll wager. He got to his feet. "I'll be going now, if you've no objection."

Chief Crowley waved a hand. "We'll notify you if you're needed again."

"Will you bring Mrs. Scarlett word of her husband's death?"

"I'll dispatch a man." The Chief added wryly, "I imagine she'd rather not hear it from you, under the circumstances."

Quincannon said, "I expect not," between his teeth and took his leave.



The law offices of James Scarlett were on the southern fringe of Chinatown, less than half a mile from the Hall of Justice. Quincannon had visited the dingy, two-story building earlier in the day, after leaving Andrea Scarlett with Sabina. The place had been dark and locked up tight then; the same was true when he arrived there a few minutes past midnight.

He paid the hansom driver at the corner, walked back through heavy shadows to the entranceway. Brooding the while, as he had in the cab, about the incident in Ross Alley. How had the gunman known enough to lie in ambush as he had? If he'd been following Scarlett, why not simply enter the opium resort and shoot him there? Witnesses were never a worry to highbinders. The other explanation was that it was Quincannon who had been followed, though it seemed impossible that anyone in Chinatown could know that Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services, had been hired by Mrs. Scarlett to find and protect her husband.

Then there was the fact that the assassin had fired three shots, the last two of which had come perilously close to sending Quincannon to join *his* ancestors. Poor and hurried shooting caused by darkness? Or had he also been a target? Something about the gunman fretted him, too, something he could not quite put his finger on.

The whole business smacked of hidden motives, for a fact. And hidden dangers. He did not like to be made a pawn in any piece of intrigue. He liked it almost as little as being shot at, intentionally or otherwise, and failing at a job he had been retained to do. He meant to get to the bottom of it, with or without official sanction.

Few door latches had ever withstood his ministrations, and the one on James Scarlett's building was no exception. Another attorney occupied the downstairs rooms; Quincannon climbed a creaky staircase to the second floor. The pebbled-glass door imprinted with the words *J. H. Scarlett, Attorney-at-Law* was not locked. This puzzled him slightly, though not for long.

Inside, he struck a sulphur match, found the gas outlet—the building was too old and shabby to have been wired for electricity—and lit the flame. Its pale glow showed him a dusty anteroom containing two desks whose bare surfaces indicated that it had been some while since they had been occupied by either law clerk or secretary. He proceeded through a doorway into Scarlett's private sanctum.

His first impression was that the lawyer had been a remarkably untidy individual. A few seconds later he revised this opinion; the office had been searched in a hurried but rather thorough fashion. Papers littered the top of a large oak desk, the floor around it, and the floor under a bank of wooden file cases. Two of the file drawers

were partly open. A wastebasket behind the desk had been overturned and its contents gone through. A shelf of law books showed signs of having been examined as well.

The fine hand of a highbinder? Possibly, though the methods used here were a good deal less destructive than those usually employed by the *boo how doy*.

The smell of must and mildew wrinkled his nostrils as he crossed to the desk, giving him to wonder just how much time Scarlett had spent in these premises. The office wanted a good airing, if not a match to purge it completely. Scowling, he sifted through the papers on and below the desk. They told him nothing except that almost all of Scarlett's recent clients had been Chinese; none of the names was familiar and none of the addresses was on Fowler Alley. The desk drawers yielded even less of interest, and the slim accumulation of briefs, letters, and invoices in the file drawers was likewise unproductive. None bore any direct reference to either the Hip Sing or Kwong Dock tongs, or to Fong Ching under his own name or any of his known aliases.

The only interesting thing about the late Mr. Scarlett's office, in fact, was the state in which Quincannon had found it. What had the previous intruder been searching for? And whatever it was, had he found it?

Sabina was already at her desk when he arrived at the Market Street offices of Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services, at nine A.M. She looked bright and well-scrubbed, her glossy black hair piled high on her head and fastened with a jade barrette. As always, Quincannon's hard heart softened and his pulses quickened at sight of her. A fine figure of a woman, Miss Sabina Carpenter. For a few seconds, as he shed his derby but not his chesterfield, the wicked side of his imagination speculated once again on what that fine figure would look like divested of its skirt and jacket, shirtwaist and lacy undergarments. . . .

She narrowed her eyes at him as he crossed the room. "Before we get down to business," she said, "I'll thank you to put my clothes back on."

"Eh?" Sudden warmth crept out of Quincannon's collar. "My dear Sabina! You can't think that I—"

"I don't think it, I know it. I know *you*, John Quincannon, far better than you think I do."

He sighed. "Perhaps, though you often mistake my motives."

"I doubt that. Was your sleepless night a reward of that lascivious mind of yours?"

"How did you know—"

"Bloodshot eyes in saggy pouches. If I didn't know better, I'd think you had forsaken your temperance pledge."

"Observant wench. No, it was neither Demon Rum nor impure thoughts nor my misunderstood affections for you that kept me awake most of the blasted night."

"What, then?"

"The death of James Scarlett and the near death of your most obedient servant."

The words startled her, though only someone who knew Sabina as he did would have been aware of it; her round face betrayed only the barest shadow of her surprise. "What happened, John?"

He told her in detail, including the things that bothered him about the incident and the speculations shared with the three police officers. The smooth skin of her forehead and around her generous mouth bore lines of concern when he finished.

"Bad business," she said. "And bad for business, losing a man we were hired to protect to an assassin's bullet. Not that you're to be blamed, of course."

"Of course," Quincannon said sardonically. "But others will blame me. The only way to undo the damage is for me to find the scoundrel responsible before the police do."

"Us to find him, you mean."

"Us," he agreed.

"I suppose it's back to Chinatown for you."

"It's where the whole of the answer lies."

"Fowler Alley?"

"If Scarlett's mutterings were significant and not part of a hop dream."

"You said he sounded frightened when he spoke the name. Opium dreams are seldom nightmares, John. Men and women use the stuff to escape from nightmares, real or imaginary."

"True."

"Scarlett's other words—'blue shadow.' A connection of some sort to Fowler Alley?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure—but what I misheard him and the phrase only sounded like 'blue shadow.'"

"Spoken in the same frightened tone?"

Quincannon cudgeled his memory. "I can't be certain."

"Well, our client may have some idea. While you're in Chinatown, I'll pay a call on her."

"I was about to suggest that." He didn't add that this was a task he himself wished to avoid at all costs. Facing a female client whom he had failed would have embarrassed him mightily. The job required Sabina's fine, tactful hand. "Ask her if she knows of any incriminating documents her husband might have had in his possession. And where he kept his private papers. If it wasn't at his office, the mug who searched it before me may not have found what he was after."

"I will. Who would the mug be, do you suppose, if not one of Little Pete's highbinders?"

"I don't say that it wasn't a highbinder. Only that the job seemed to have a more professional touch than the hatchet man's usual ham-fisted tactics."

"Is there anything you can remember about the gunman?" Sabina asked. "It's possible he was known to Mrs. Scarlett as well as her husband."

"It was too dark and his hat pulled too low for a clear squint at his face. Average size, average height." Quincannon scratched irritably at his freebooter's whiskers. "Still, there *was* something odd about him. . . ."

"Appearance? Movements? Did he say anything?"

"Not a word. Hell and damn! I can't seem to dredge the thing up."

"Let it be and it'll come to you eventually."

"Eventually may be too late." Quincannon clamped his derby on his head, squarely, the way he always wore it when he was on an important mission. "Enough talk. It's action I crave and action I'll have."

"Not too much of it, I hope. Shall we meet back here at one o'clock?"

"If I'm not here by then," Quincannon said, "it'll be because I'm somewhere with my hands around a highbinder's throat."

Fowler Alley was a typical Chinatown passage: narrow, crooked, packed with men and women mostly dressed in the black clothing of the lower-caste Chinese. Paper lanterns strung along rickety balconies and the glowing braziers of food sellers added the only color and light to a tunnel-like expanse made even more gloomy by an overcast sky.

Quincannon, one of the few Caucasians among the throng, wandered along looking at storefronts and the upper floors of sagging firetraps roofed in tarpaper and gravel. Many of the second and third floors were private apartments, hidden from view behind dusty, curtained windows. Some of the business establishments were identifiable from their displayed wares: restaurants, herb shops, a clothiers, a vegetable market. Others, tucked away behind closed doors, darkened windows, and signs in inexplicable Chinese characters, remained a mystery.

Nothing in the alley aroused his suspicions or pricked his curiosity. There were no tong headquarters here, no opium resorts or fan-tan parlors or houses of ill repute; and nothing even remotely suggestive of blue shadows.

Quincannon retraced his steps through the passage, stopping the one other white man he saw and several Chinese. Did anyone

know James Scarlett? The Caucasian was a dry-goods drummer on his second and what he obviously hoped would be his last visit to the Quarter; he had never heard of Scarlett, he said. All the Chinese either didn't speak English or pretended they didn't.

Fowler Alley lay open on both ends, debouching into other passages, but at least for the present, Quincannon thought sourly as he left it, it was a dead end.

The Hip Sing tong was headquartered on Waverly Place, once called Pike Street, one of Chinatown's more notorious thoroughfares. Here, temples and fraternal buildings stood cheek by jowl with opium and gambling dens and the cribs of the flower willows. Last night, when Quincannon had started his hunt for James Scarlett, the passage had been mostly empty; by daylight it teemed with carts, wagons, buggies, half-starved dogs and cats, and human pedestrians. The noise level was high and constant, a shrill tide dominated by the lilting dialects of Canton, Shanghai, and the provinces of Old China.

Two doors down from the three-story tong building was the Four Families Temple, a building of equal height but a much more ornate facade, its balconies carved and painted and decorated with pagoda cornices. On impulse Quincannon turned in through the entrance doors and proceeded to what was known as the Hall of Sorrows, where funeral services were conducted and the bodies of the high-born were laid out in their caskets for viewing. Candlelight flickered; the pungent odor of incense assailed him. The long room, deserted at the moment, was ceiled with a massive scrolled wood carving covered in gold leaf, from which hung dozens of lanterns in pink and green, red and gold. At the far end were a pair of altars with a red prayer bench fronting one. Smaller altars on either side wore embroidered cloths on which fruit, flowers, candles, and joss urns had been arranged.

It was from here that the remains of Bing Ah Kee, venerable president of the Hip Sing Company, had disappeared two nights ago. The old man had died of natural causes and his corpse, after having been honored with a lavish funeral parade, had been returned to the temple for one last night; the next morning it was scheduled to be placed in storage to await passage to Bing's ancestral home in Canton for burial. The thieves had removed the body from its coffin and made off with it sometime during the early morning hours—a particularly bold deed considering the close proximity of the Hip Sing building. Yet they had managed it unseen and unheard, leaving no clue as to their identity or purpose.

Body snatching was uncommon but not unheard of in Chinatown. When such ghoulishness did occur, tong rivalry was almost

always the motivating factor—a fact which supported Sergeant Gentry's contention that the disappearance of Bing Ah Kee's husk was the work of Little Pete and the Kwong Dock. Yet stealing an enemy leader's bones without openly claiming responsibility was a damned odd way of warmongering. The usual ploy was a series of assassinations of key figures in the rival tong by local or imported hatchet men.

Why, then, if Little Pete wanted all-out warfare with the Hip Sing, would he order the murder of a white attorney to shut his mouth, but not also order the deaths of Hip Sing highbinders and elders?

The odor of fish was strong in Quincannon's nostrils as he left the temple. And the stench did not come from the fish market on the opposite side of the street.

The ground floor of the Hip Sing Company was a fraternal gathering place, open to the street; the two upper floors, where tong business was conducted, were closed off and would be well guarded. Quincannon entered freely, passed down a corridor into a large common room. Several black-garbed men, most of them elderly, were playing mah-jongg at a table at one end. Other men sat on cushions and benches, sipping tea, smoking, reading newspapers. A few cast wary glances at the *fan kwei* intruder, but most ignored him.

A middle-aged fellow, his skull completely bald except for a long, braided queue, approached him, bowed, and asked in halting English, "There is something the gentleman seeks?"

Quincannon said, "An audience with Mock Don Yuen," and handed over one of his business cards.

"Please to wait here, honorable sir." The Chinese bowed again, took the card away through a doorway covered by a worn silk tapestry.

Quincannon waited. No one paid him the slightest attention now. He was loading his pipe when the bald man returned and said, "You will follow me, please."

They passed through the tapestried doorway, up a stairway so narrow Quincannon had to turn his body slightly as he ascended. Another man waited at the top, this one young, thickset, with a curved scar under one eye and both hands hidden inside the voluminous sleeves of his blouse. Highbinder on guard duty: those sleeves would conceal revolver or knife or short, sharp hatchet, or possibly all three.

As the bald one retreated down the stairs, highbinder and "foreign devil" eyed one another impassively. Quincannon had no intention of relinquishing his Navy Colt; if any effort were made to search him, he would draw the weapon and take his chances. But the guard made no such attempt. In swift, gliding movements

he turned and went sideways along a hallway, his gaze on Quincannon the whole while. At an open doorway at the far end, he stopped and stood as if at attention. When Quincannon entered the room beyond, the highbinder filled the doorway behind him as effectively as any panel of wood.

The chamber might have been an office in any building in San Francisco. There was a long, high desk, a safe, stools, round table set with a tea service. The only Oriental touches were a red silk wall tapestry embroidered with threads of gold, a statue of Buddha, and an incense bowl that emitted a rich, spicy scent. Lamp-light highlighted the face of the man standing behind the desk—a man of no more than thirty, slender, clean-shaven, his hair worn long but unqueued, western-style, his body encased in a robe of red brocaded silk that didn't quite conceal the shirt and string tie underneath. On one corner of the desk lay a black slouch hat with a red topknot. Quincannon said, "You're not Mock Don Yuen."

"No, I am Mock Quan, his son."

"I asked for an audience with your father."

"My father is not here, Mr. Quincannon." Mock Quan's English was unaccented and precise. "I have been expecting you."

"Have you now?"

"Your reputation is such that I knew you would come to ask questions about the unfortunate occurrence last night."

"Questions which you'll answer truthfully, of course."

"Truth is supreme in the house of Hip Sing."

"And what is the truth of James Scarlett's death?"

"It was arranged by the Kwong Dock and their cowardly leader, Fong Ching. You must know this."

Quincannon shrugged. "For what purpose?"

"Fong is vicious and unscrupulous and his hunger for power has never been sated. He hates and fears the Hip Sing, for we are stronger than any of the tongs under his yoke. He wishes to destroy the Hip Sing so he may reign as king of Chinatown."

"He's the king now, isn't he?"

"No." Mock Quan's anger came like the sudden flare of a match. Almost as quickly it was extinguished, but not before Quincannon had a glimpse beneath the erudite mask. "He is a fat jackal in lion's skin, the son of a turtle."

That last revealed the depth of Mock Quan's loathing for Little Pete; it was the bitterest of Chinese insults. Quincannon said, "Jackals feed on the dead. The dead such as Bing Ah Kee?"

"Oh yes, it is beyond question Fong Ching is responsible for that outrage as well."

"What do you suppose was done with the body?"

Mock Quan made a slicing gesture with one slim hand. "Should the vessel of the honorable Bing Ah Kee have been destroyed, may

Fong Ching suffer the death of a thousand cuts ten thousand times through eternity."

"If the Hip Sing is so sure he's responsible, why has nothing been done to retaliate?"

"Without proof of Fong Ching's treachery, the decision of the council of elders was that the wisest course was to withhold a declaration of war."

"Even after what happened to James Scarlett? His murder could be termed an act of open aggression."

"Mr. Scarlett was neither Chinese nor a member of the Hip Sing Company, merely an employee." Mock Quan took a pre-rolled cigarette from a box on his desk, fitted it into a carved ivory holder. "The council met again this morning. It was decided then to permit the American Terror, Lieutenant Price, and his raiders to punish Fong Ching and the Kwong Dock, thus to avoid the shedding of Hip Sing blood. This will be done soon."

"What makes you so sure?"

"The police now have evidence of Fong Ching's guilt."

"Evidence?" Quincannon scowled. "What evidence?"

"The Kwong Dock highbinder who shot Mr. Scarlett was himself shot and killed early this morning, during a police raid on Fong Ching's shoe factory. A letter was found on the *kwei chan* bearing the letterhead and signature of the esteemed attorney."

"What kind of letter?"

"I do not know," Mock Quan said. "I know only that the American Terror is preparing to lead other raids which will crush the life from the turtle's offspring."

Quincannon was silent for a time, while he digested this new information. If anything, it deepened the piscine odor of things. At length he asked, "Whose idea was it to leave the job to the police? Yours or your father's?"

The question discomfited Mock Quan. His eyes narrowed; he exhaled smoke in a thin jet. "I am not privileged to sit on the council of elders."

"No, but your father is. And I'll wager you have his confidence as well as his ear, and that your powers of persuasion are considerable."

"Such matters are of no concern to you."

"They're of great concern to me. I was nearly shot, too, in Ross Alley. And I'm not as convinced as the police that Little Pete is behind the death of James Scarlett or the disappearance of Bing Ah Kee's remains."

Mock Quan made an odd hissing sound with his lips, a Chinese expression of anger and contempt. There was less oil and more steel in his voice when he spoke again. "You would do well to bow

to the superior intelligence of the police, Mr. Quincannon. Lest your blood stain a Chinatown alley after all."

"I don't like warnings, Mock Quan."

"A humble Chinese warn a distinguished Occidental detective? They were merely words of caution and prudence."

Quincannon's smile was nothing more than a lip-stretch. He said, "I have no intention of leaving a single drop of my blood in Chinatown."

"Then you would be wise not to venture here again after the cloak of night has fallen." His smile was as specious as Quincannon's. So was the invitation which followed: "Will you join me in a cup of excellent rose-petal tea before you leave?"

"Another time, perhaps."

"Perhaps. *Ho hang la*—I hope you have a safe walk."

"Health and long life to you, too."

As he made his way out of the building, Quincannon felt a definite lift in spirits. The briny aroma had grown so strong that now he had a very good idea of its source, its species, and its cause.

Your hat, Mock Quan, he thought with grim humor. In your blasted hat!

Sabina said, "Mrs. Scarlett has taken to her bed with grief and the comfort of a bottle of crème de menthe. It made questioning her difficult, to say the least."

"Were you able to find out anything?"

"Little enough. Her husband, as far as she is aware, had no incriminating documents in his possession, nor does she know where he might have put such a document for safekeeping. And she has no recollection of his ever mentioning Fowler Alley in her presence."

"I was afraid that would be the case."

"Judging from your expression, your visit to Fowler Alley proved enlightening."

"Not Fowler Alley; that piece of the puzzle is still elusive. My call at the Hip Sing Company."

She raised an eyebrow. "You went there? I don't see a puncture wound anywhere. No bullets fired or hatchets or knives thrown your way?"

"Bah. I've bearded fiercer lions in their dens than Mock Quan."

"Who is Mock Quan?"

"The son of Mock Don Yuen, new leader of the tong. A sly gent with delusions of grandeur and a hunger for power as great as Little Pete's. Unless I miss my guess, he is the murderer of James Scarlett and the near murderer of your devoted partner."

Sabina's other eyebrow arched even higher. "What led you to that conclusion?"

"His hat," Quincannon said.

"His—Are you quite serious, John?"

"Never more so. The gunman outside Blind Annie's Cellar wore a black slouch hat with a red what-do-you-call-it on top—"

"A *mow-yung*," Sabina said.

He frowned. "How do you know that?"

"And why shouldn't a woman know something you don't? A *mow-yung* is a symbol of high caste in Chinese society."

"That much I do know," Quincannon growled. "Coolie food sellers don't wear 'em and neither do the *boo how doy*. That's what has been bothering me about the assassin from the first. He wasn't a highbinder but an upper-class Chinese masquerading as one."

"How do you know it was Mock Quan?"

"I don't know it for sure. A hunch, a strong one. Mock Quan is ambitious, foolhardy, corrupt, and ruthless. He covets Little Pete's empire in Chinatown. He as much as said so."

"Why would he risk killing Scarlett himself?"

"If my hunch is correct, he's working at cross-purposes to those of his father and the Hip Sing elders. It's his plan to let Lieutenant Price and the flying squad finish off his enemies and then to take over Little Pete's position as crime boss—with or without the blessings of his father and the tong. He has allies in the Hip Sing, certainly, but none he trusted enough to do the job on Scarlett. He's the sort to have no qualms about committing cold-blooded murder."

"For the dual purpose of stirring up the police and silencing Scarlett? Mock Quan is behind the body snatching, too, if you're right."

"I'd bet five gold eagles on it," Quincannon agreed. "And another five he's at least partly responsible for the letter of Scarlett's found on the Kwong Dock highbinder who was killed by the police this morning."

"That's fresh news," Sabina said. "Tell me."

He told her.

"I wonder how Mock Quan could have managed such flummery as that?"

"I can think of one way."

"Yes," she said slowly, "so can I. But proving it may be difficult. The case against Mock Quan, too."

"I know it. But there has to be a way to expose him before the kettle boils over. His plan is mad, but madder ones have succeeded and will again." He began to pace the office. "If we only knew the significance of Fowler Alley . . . Did you manage to have a look around the Scarlett lodgings?"

Sabina nodded. "Scarlett kept a desk there, but it contained nothing revealing. I did learn one small item of interest from Mrs.

Scarlett before she fell asleep. It answers one question, while posing another."

"Yes?"

"She was followed when she came to see us yesterday. She intended to mention the fact but she was too upset about her husband."

"Followed? Not by a Chinese?"

"No, a Caucasian. A stranger to her."

"What did he look like?"

"She wasn't able to get a clear look at him. A man in a blue suit was all the description she could provide."

Quincannon muttered, "Blue shadow, eh?"

"Evidently. Another Caucasian on the Hip Sing payroll, one of Mock Quan's allies. And the explanation of how Mock Quan was able to follow you on your rounds of the opium resorts."

"Mmm." Quincannon continued to pace for a time. Then, abruptly, he stopped and said, "Perhaps not such a *small* item of interest after all, my dear."

"Have you thought of something?"

"Been bitten by another hunch is more like it." He reached for his coat and derby.

"Where are you off to?"

"Scarlett's law offices. My search last night was hasty and it's possible I overlooked something of importance. Or rather, spent my time looking for the wrong thing."

No one else had passed through the portal marked *J. H. Scarlett, Attorney-at-Law* since Quincannon's nocturnal visit. Or if anyone had, it'd been without any further disturbance of the premises.

With a close curb on his impatience, he set about once more sifting through the lawyer's papers. He examined each document carefully, some more than once. The hunch that had bitten him had plenty of teeth: One name kept reappearing in similar context, and the more he saw it, the more furiously his nimble brain clicked and whirled. When he stood at last from the desk, his smile and the profane oath he uttered through it had a wolfish satisfaction.

He was certain, now, that he knew most of what there was to know. The only piece of the game he *didn't* have, in fact, was the one that had eluded him since last night—Fowler Alley.

A sharp, chill wind blew along the alley's close confines. Litter swirled; pigtailed men and work-stooped women hurried on their errands, not half so many as there had been earlier. Quincannon sensed an urgency in their movements, an almost palpable tension in the air. Word had spread of the flying squad's planned

raids and the law-abiding were eager to be off the streets before dark.

Quincannon walked slowly, hands buried in the pockets of his Chesterfield, his shoulders hunched and his head swiveling left and right. The buildings in the first block, with their grimy windows and indecipherable calligraphy, told him no more than they had earlier. He entered the second block, frustration mounting in him again.

He was halfway along when he noticed a high-sided black wagon drawn up in front of some sort of business establishment. A small cluster of citizens stood watching something being loaded into the rear of the wagon. Quincannon moved closer. He was taller than most Chinese; he could see over the tops of the watchers' heads as he neared. One clear look at the object being loaded and he fetched up in a sudden standstill.

Casket.

Hearse.

Undertaking parlors.

He turned swiftly, ran back on that side of the alley until he came to an opening between the buildings. A tunnel-like walkway brought him into a deeply rutted dirt passage that paralleled Fowler Alley. He counted buildings to the rear of the one that housed the undertaker's. The door there was neither barred nor latched; he pushed it open with his left hand, drawing his Navy Colt with his right, and entered the gloomy corridor within.

The sickish odor of formaldehyde dilated his nostrils, set him to breathing through his mouth as he eased along the hall. From the front of the building the singsong of Chinese dialect came to him, but back here there was no sound.

The lantern-lit chamber into which he emerged was empty except for rows of coffins, most of them plain, a few of the lacquered teakwood favored by the high-born and the wealthy. A tapestried doorway opened to the right. Quincannon went there, pushed the covering aside.

Here was the embalming room, the source of the formaldehyde odor. He crossed it, past a metal table, an herb cabinet, another cabinet in which needles, razors, and other tools of the mortician's trade gleamed, to where a row of three slender storage vaults were set into the wall. The first vault he opened was empty. The second contained the body of a very old Mandarin whose skin was so wrinkled he might have been mummified. Quincannon opened the third.

The body in this vault was also an old man's, but one who had lived a much more pampered life. It was dressed in an intricately embroidered robe of gold silk; the cheeks had been powdered, the

thin drooping moustaches trimmed; a prayerbook was still clutched between the gnarled hands.

"Bing Ah Kee," Quincannon said under his breath, "or I'm not the master detective I believe I am."

He closed the vault, retraced his steps to the doorway, pushed the tapestry aside. And came face-to-face with a youngish individual wearing a stained leather apron over his blouse and pantaloons. The man let out a startled bleat and an oath or epithet that threatened to escalate into a full-fledged cry of alarm. As he turned to flee, voice just starting to rise, Quincannon tapped him with the barrel of his Navy at the spot where queue met scalp. Flight and cry both ended instantly.

Quincannon stepped over the fallen Chinese, hurried across the coffin room and into the rear corridor. Fortunately for him, he had the presence of mind to ease the outside door open and his head out for a look around, instead of rushing through. It saved him from having some tender and perhaps vital portion of his anatomy punctured by a bullet.

As it was, the gunman lying in wait in a nearby doorway fired too hastily; the slug thwacked into the wall several inches from Quincannon's head, which he quickly jerked back inside. There were no more shots. He stood tensely, listening. Was that the slap of footfalls? He edged the door open again and poked his head out at a lower point than the first time.

Footfalls, indeed. The assassin was on the run. Quincannon straightened and stepped outside, but before he could trigger a shot the black-outfitted figure vanished into the walkway to Fowler Alley.

Mock Quan, of course, in his highbinder's guise. The fact that he'd made this attempt at homicide in broad daylight was an indication of just how desperate Quincannon's discovery had made him. So was the craven way he'd taken flight after his first shot missed its mark.

That was the difference between despots such as Little Pete and would-be despots such as Mock Quan, Quincannon mused. Both were rapacious and reckless, but the true tyrant was too arrogant to give himself up to panic. The would-be tyrant was far easier to bring down because his arrogance was no more than a thin membrane over a shell of cowardice.

When Quincannon arrived at the Hall of Justice he found Price, Gentry, and a dozen other men of the flying squad already preparing for the night's assault on Chinatown. The basement assembly room was strewn with coils of rope, firemen's axes, sledgehammers, artillery, and bulletproof vests similar to the coats of chain mail worn by the *boo how doy*.

He drew the lieutenant aside and did some fast talking, the gist of which was that he had information which would render the raids unnecessary. Fifteen minutes later he was once again seated in the chief's office, holding court before the same three officers as on his previous visit. As he spoke, he noted that the expressions worn by the trio were more or less the same, too: Crowley's stern and disapproving, Price's intently thoughtful, Gentry's hostile.

None of them commented until he finished and leaned back in his chair. Then each spoke in rapid succession.

Crowley: "That's quite a tale, Quincannon."

Gentry: "Hogwash, I say."

Price: "Fact or fiction, we'll find out soon enough. I want my own look inside that undertaking parlor."

"What good will that do?" Gentry argued. "Even if Mock Quan is behind all that's happened, old Bing's bones will be long gone by the time we get there."

"I think not, Sergeant," Quincannon said. "Mock Quan likely has nowhere to move the body on short notice. And he won't destroy it for the same reason he didn't before—fear of the wrath of the gods and all of Chinatown. Even if he were able to remove the body, there are bound to be ties between him and the mortician. Put pressure on that party and his terror of tong reprisal will bring out the truth. I'll warrant the whole house of cards can be collapsed around Mock Quan in a few hours, and that he knows it as well as I do. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that he has already left the city—on the run ever since his bullet missed my head."

"Nor would I, if you're right," Price said. "And I'm beginning to believe you are."

The chief leaned forward. "You really think Mock Quan is capable of plotting such a scheme, Will?"

"I wouldn't have until now. He's sneaky and ruthless, yes, but not half so clever as Little Pete. Still . . ."

"The plan wasn't his alone," Quincannon said. "He had help in its devising."

"Help? Help from whom?"

"A blue shadow."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"James Scarlett said two things before he was killed. One was 'Fowler Alley'; the other was 'blue shadow.' And the truth is, he was as afraid of a blue shadow as he was of Mock Quan. His guilty knowledge wasn't only of the body snatching, but of the identity of Mock Quan's partner—the man who followed Scarlett's wife to my offices yesterday and who arranged for Mock Quan to follow me in Chinatown last night."

"What partner?" Chief Crowley demanded. "What does blue shadow mean?"

"It means a shadowy person in blue," Quincannon said. "Not a plain blue suit, as the partner wore yesterday, but a blue uniform—a policeman's uniform." He paused dramatically. "One of the policemen in this room is Mock Quan's accomplice."

All three officers came to their feet as one. Gentry aimed a quivering forefinger as if it were the barrel of his sidearm. "Preposterous nonsense! How dare you accuse one of us—"

"You, Sergeant. I'm accusing *you*."

The smoky air fairly crackled. Price and Crowley were both staring at Gentry; the sergeant's eyes threw sparks at Quincannon. The cords in the short man's neck bulged. His color was a shade less purple than an eggplant's.

"It's a dirty lie!" he shouted.

"Cold, hard fact."

Price said with contained fury, "Can you prove this allegation, Quincannon?"

"I can, to your satisfaction. After I left here last night, I went to James Scarlett's law offices. They had already been searched sometime earlier, likely soon after Mrs. Scarlett visited my offices. At first I believed the job was done by one of the highbinders, hunting any incriminating evidence Scarlett may have had in his possession. But that wasn't the case. The search hadn't the stamp of the tong man; it was much more professionally conducted, as a policeman goes about such a frisk. Gentry's work, gentlemen."

"For the same reason?"

"More probably to look for evidence of his conspiracy with Mock Quan. If there was any such evidence, Gentry made off with it. He also made off with a letter written on Scarlett's stationery and signed by the attorney—the same letter you found on the Kwong Dock highbinder who was killed last night. Killed by Gentry, wasn't he? And the letter found by Gentry afterward?"

"Yes, by God. Right on both counts."

"He tried to put a knife in me!" Gentry cried. "You saw him, Lieutenant—"

"I saw nothing of the kind. I took your word for it."

"A clever attempt to tighten the frame against Little Pete," Quincannon said. "As was Gentry's constant urging of you and Chief Crowley to crush Pete and the Kwong Dock."

"Lies! Don't listen to him—"

The other two officers ignored him. Price said, "Go on, Quincannon."

"When Gentry searched Scarlett's offices he carried off any direct evidence he may have found, as I said. But he failed to notice indirect evidence just as damning. Scarlett's legal records indicate the sergeant was in the pay of the Hip Sing, just as Scarlett himself was, long *before* Gentry and Mock Quan cooked up

their takeover scheme. He was mixed up in nearly all of the cases in which Scarlett successfully defended a Hip Sing member. In some, his testimony—false or distorted—resulted in acquittal. In others, it's plain that he suppressed evidence or suborned perjury or both."

Gentry started toward Quincannon with murder in his eye. "If there are any such lies in Scarlett's records, *you* put them there, you damned flycop! You're the one trying to pull a frame—"

Price stepped in front of him. "Stand where you are, Sergeant," he said in a voice that brooked no disobedience.

Quincannon went on, "Another piece of proof: Last night, if you recall, Gentry suggested taking the flying squad to find evidence of Little Pete's guilt in Scarlett's death—the bogus evidence he later planted himself. He also said, 'Evidence to point to the cold storage where old Bing's bones are stashed.' Yet for all any of us knew at that point, the body might have been burned, or buried, or weighted and cast into the Bay, or had any of a dozen other things done with it or to it. Why would he use the specific term 'cold storage' unless he knew that was what had been done with old Bing's remains?"

Gentry called him a name and tried once again to mount a charge. The lieutenant shoved him back, none too gently.

"And if all that isn't sufficient validation of his duplicity," Quincannon concluded, "there is Mrs. Scarlett. She had a good look at the man who followed her yesterday and can easily identify him." A bald lie, this, but an effective capper nonetheless. "Gentry had no official reason to be following the woman, did he, Lieutenant?"

"No," Price said darkly, "he didn't."

The chief stalked around his desk and fixed Gentry with a gimlet eye. "A damned highbinder no better than Little Pete or Mock Quan—is that what you are, Gentry?"

"No! No, I swear—"

"Because if so I'll see your mangy hide strung from the highest flagpole in the city."

Gentry shook his head, his eyes rolling, sweat shining on his forehead and cheeks. He was still wagging his head as Quincannon judiciously slipped out and went to find a quiet corner where he could smoke his pipe and enjoy his vindication.

"Gentry's shell was no harder to crack than a Dungeness crab's," he told Sabina awhile later. "It took Crowley and Price less than fifteen minutes to break him wide open."

"No doubt with the aid of some gentle persuasion."

"Have you ever known the blue shadows to use another kind?"

She laughed. "What was his motive? Power and greed, the same as Mock Quan's?"

"Those, and severe gambling losses. Which was why he sold himself to the Hip Sing in the first place. It seems the sergeant has a fondness for roulette and fan-tan, and little skill at any game of chance."

"Well, I must say you've plenty of skill at your particular game."

"I have, haven't I?"

"Exceeded only by your modesty," Sabina said. "Still, it's thanks to you that the crisis in Chinatown has been averted."

"For the time being. Until another, smarter Mock Quan emerges or something or someone else lights the fuse. Mark my words—one of these days, the whole Quarter will go up in flames."

"You may be right. In any event, this is one case it will be a relief, if not a pleasure, to mark closed. We'll waive Mrs. Scarlett's fee, of course. I'll post a letter to her tomorrow— Why are you looking at me that way?"

Quincannon was aghast. He said, "Waive her fee?"

"It's the least we can do for the poor woman."

"Sabina, have you forgotten that I was shot at twice and almost killed? As well as made to trek through low Chinatown alleys, prowl opium dens, and invade an undertaking parlor in search of a snatched corpse?"

"I haven't forgotten."

"Well, then? All of that, not to mention a near tarnish on our fine reputation as detectives, for not so much as a copper cent?"

"I'm afraid so, my erstwhile Scot. It's the proper thing to do and you know it."

"Bah. I know nothing of the kind."

Her expression softened. After a silence during which she seemed to be doing a bit of weighing and balancing, she said, "I suppose you should have one small reward, at least."

"Yes? And what would that be?"

"An evening out with me, if you like. Dinner at the Palace, then a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's new opera at the Tivoli Theater. I've been wanting to see *Patience* since it opened."

Quincannon's momentary gloom evaporated as swiftly as an ice cube in a furnace. Smiling jauntily, he said, "And after the performance?"

"You may escort me to my flat."

"And after that?"

Sabina sighed. "You never give up, do you, John Quincannon?"

"Never. For my intentions are honorable, my passions sweet and pure. No, never, as long as a breath remains in my body."

The word Sabina uttered in response to that was heartfelt and decidedly unladylike. ●

HERE FLUFFY!

by Mat Coward

One morning about the time of my first grey hair, I knocked on Mr. and Mrs. Grant's front door in Buddleia Drive. What I do for a living is, I look for lost cats. Actually, it's not always as glamorous as it sounds.

Most of my work is in the suburbs, for obvious reasons—more gardens, more cats, more money—but I'll go just about anywhere in the North London area: Have in-car stereo, will travel.

The door opened, and my latest client appeared before me for the first time. He had obviously been crying. He hadn't shaved for two or three days, and his clothes smelt of sweat. I was so delighted I almost did a little dance right there on the doorstep.

I don't want to sound cynical, but this is a business, and I need the cat's owners to be upset. If they're not upset, why would they spend the money? Mine is like any other service industry: Whatever I do for you, you could probably do for yourself, but it's easier to have me do it. If you can afford to.

As a rule of thumb, if the woman's crying, that's good—if the man's crying, that's money in the bank.

"Mr. Grant? Hi, my name's Charlie."

Well, it is now, anyway. Goes with the job. Whatever line you're in, you need to have a name that suits. For me, Charlie's just right: friendly, relaxed, but reliable. And classless. Which means, whatever class you think you are, Charlie could be a little lower. In the suburbs, attention to detail is—yup, money in the bank.

"You're the cat detective," said Grant firmly, as if he was reminding me. He was a sniffy, yuppie type. I didn't like him.

"I've done just about every type of writing for every type of market," says Mat Coward, "but in the last few years I've been specializing in humor columns, book reviews, and short stories. My stories have appeared in numerous magazines in Britain, the U.S., and Europe, and have been broadcast on BBC radio." The author's darkly humorous debut for *EQMM* may be the start of a series; if so, it will be his first. ¶

"I am," I admitted, and then took a moment off to watch him looking at me. It was quite an entertainment, as it often is. He looked at my baldish, fairish head, grinning nicely at him from somewhere about the height of his shoulders. He looked at my somewhat round midsection, and my comfortably stretched trousers. He looked at my unapologetically battered briefcase, which he probably thought I'd been given by my dad for my eighteenth birthday, and which, in fact, I had—briefcases thirty years ago having been built to last.

Mr. Grant looked at the crumpled normality which I painstakingly applied every morning, wore like a mask, like a uniform, even though all it covered was more crumpled normality, and he thought: You're some cheerful, tubby guy from the pub. You groan a bit when you get up from the bar stool and you look a bit sheepish when you sit down again. I'm fifteen years younger than you, and I've driven past hundreds of people like you over the years. No wonder you find lost cats for a living, instead of doing something sensible.

Grant gave me the nearest thing to a smile you're ever likely to see in a middle-class London suburb and asked me in to meet his wife.

"It's brown," said Neil Grant, standing behind the sofa on which his wife sat.

"No, love, she's tabby," said Lissa Grant, shredding a few more man-size tissues between her twisting fingers.

"Yes, well. It's a kind of brown tabby," explained Neil. "With spots."

I looked up from my official cat-detective's notebook. "Your cat has acne?" They didn't laugh. Why should they? If they'd wanted a comedian who made house calls, they'd have called in a plumber.

"Neil means stripes," said Lissa. (*Lissa? That's a name? I'll bet you a week's beer there wasn't anyone called Lissa in your class at primary school.*)

"I mean spots, actually," said Neil, tightly. "It has spots on its back and belly."

"Oh, *those* spots," said Lissa. "I thought you meant the spots on her tail."

"Those aren't spots," said Neil. "Those are stripes."

"I know, dear—that's what I'm saying. They're *not* spots."

None of this would have been necessary if only the Grants had followed Charlie's First Law of Hindsight: The first thing you do when you get a new cat is you take a whole roll of photos, showing your pet clearly from every angle. Have you ever tried describing a particular cat using only English?

As it happens, this is one of the parts of my job which I find most entertaining. Again, I wouldn't have you think me cruel—but mine is not a life of champagne and slippers, and I must seize my smiles where I can.

Needless to say, this pair didn't have a photograph. They hadn't had the cat long, they explained; she'd been a gift from friends who were relocating to the U.S.A. I gathered that, as far as Neil was concerned, the gift had not been a wholly welcome one.

That explained his worried look, anyway: He didn't give a damn for the moggy, but he wasn't looking forward to the embarrassment of explaining its loss to its previous owners.

I took as good a description as I could get and then moved on to my favourite question—the one that, on good days, produces the best laugh of all.

"And what is her name, Mrs. Grant? What does the cat answer to?"

"Butch," said Neil, at the same moment as Lissa said, "Fluffy."

"Damn cat was a lesbian," muttered Mr. Grant. "Shoulders like an American footballer."

I continued with the interview long enough to make it look professional, but not so long that its fatuity would become obvious, and then took my leave, promising the Grants daily bulletins on my progress, and advising them, as I always do, not to give house room to either of those two great impostors: hope or despair.

There is one great secret to cat detecting, and it is this: If a missing cat is going to be found, then nine times out of ten it will be found within hollering distance of its home.

Every now and then I get clients who are convinced that their pets have been stolen by vivisectionists, or by fur trappers servicing the German hat-and-gloves industry. And, yes, both these things do happen, of that I have no doubt. But when they happen—well, get yourself another cat, because you won't be seeing yours again, ever. Not unless you're walking down a street in Hamburg one day and your eye is taken by the eerily familiar marmalade pattern of a hausfrau's headgear.

I don't charge a consultancy fee; I get paid by results. Which is why, when people try to hire me to find and recover their cats from experimental laboratories, I always tell them: "Don't call me—call the Animal Liberation Front."

I work on percentages. Say I take four cases a week, two of which end in sweet reunion. Charging as much as I can get away with (if possible, I never discuss fees up front), I can, in a happy week, make two or three hundred pounds. I've never been married, my car's a mobile wreck, and my home's a bedsit. I get by.

We live in a culture which reveres cats. Catophiles are con-

vinced that cats are more intelligent than dolphins, let alone humans, while even catophobes accept that the little monsters are possessed of deep cunning.

Not so. Not in my experience.

When I recover a lost cat, I almost invariably find it not a quarter-mile from its chain-smoking, tissue-shredding foster parents. Puss will have run off one night, startled by a backfiring car or a falling leaf, found itself in a garden it has never before visited—and bang, just like that, it has reverted to its wild state, no more able to find its way home than to surf the Internet.

The Incredible Journey is my least favourite film.

The only real detective work involved in this business is the process of narrowing down the cat's location. And, of course, before even doing that, I have a quick look around the local gutters and grass verges, in case that might save time. Yes, I *do* charge for dead cats—not as much, but I still charge. What did you think I was, a charity?

The location process is often complicated by the fact that the owners don't want me to talk to their neighbours on their behalf. This is understandable; if people wanted to have any kind of relationship with their neighbours, they wouldn't live in the suburbs. But it can make things a little tricky.

Which is why I like kids. Kids don't count—they don't count as neighbours, they don't even count as human beings. And in the suburbs (and despite what their parents may teach them) kids are about the only people who still talk to strangers.

The little boy was nine or ten, and he was sitting on the kerb outside a smart-looking bungalow on the street which ran parallel to the Grants'. He had red hair, apple cheeks, and lively eyes. If I hadn't been working, I'd have loathed him on sight.

"Hello, young man," I said, hailing him from a respectable distance. "Your mum or dad at home?" He shook his head. *Excellent!* I hunkered down on the kerb beside him, took out my tobacco and rolling papers. "You smoke?" I said. He shook his head again. I don't know, these kids today, they're so damn clean-living. I blame the parents.

I was about to ask him if he'd seen anyone answering Fluffy's description acting in a suspicious manner lately, when he beat me to it. Tugging at something in his rear jeans pocket, he said, "Can I show you a picture of my two cats?"

"Certainly you can," I said, my tones rich with professional courtesy.

He held out the photo for my inspection. As advertised, it showed two cats. One ginger, one black and white. "They're beau-

tiful," I said. Actually they were nothing special, but what do kids know? "Which one is which?" I asked him.

This took a bit of thinking about. The boy retrieved the photo from my hand and studied it awhile, chewing his lip. Eventually, he jabbed a podgy finger first at one cat and then at the other, saying: "This is this one. And . . . er . . . this is the other one."

"Right," I said. "Don't suppose you've seen another cat around lately, have you?" I described Fluffy. Or Butch. Whatever.

"If I did see him, I'd kill him," the kid replied, in that cute way kids have. He jabbed his thumb into his chest as he added, "My cats rule these streets."

"Do they, indeed?"

"Well, they will," he said, "when Mummy brings them back."

"And where's Mummy taken them? Hmm? Not to the vet, I hope, if you're planning to breed streetfighters from them."

The boy just shrugged and turned his attention to untying and retying a shoelace. Conversation over.

I gave him my card. "Well, if you do happen across poor Fluffy, give me a ring, yeah?"

But as I walked away, the boy called me back. "If he's lost, I bet I know where he is." He gave me directions for finding what he insisted was a "bomb site," adding, "I seen millions of lost cats over there."

I thanked him warmly and gave him a pound coin. Extravagant, undeniably, but this was a neighbourhood I didn't know well, and the child's information could well have saved me hours of tedious footwork.

It wasn't a bomb site. More probably, judging from the tumble-down wooden hut in the corner furthest from the path, it had been some kind of community centre or playground until four or five years ago, when our old friend recession got bored with the inner cities and decided to take a suburban vacation. Now it was just a wasteground, grassy and weeded-over, surrounded by a chainlink fence to keep the local youngsters from despoiling it with their enjoyment.

Keep Out notices don't apply to me—I'm a grownup with the scars to prove it—so I shimmied effortlessly over the fence and then spent a relaxing ten minutes on the ground on the other side, gasping, sweating, and spitting.

On brief inspection, the bomb site looked pretty promising. It looked as if the local kids did, in fact, take notice of the Keep Outs (these middle-class kids; truly, they are hopeless) and there were what we detectives call "the usual signs" of feline habitation.

No actual cats visible at the moment; too early, probably. By day they'd roost in the hut, or more likely under it. I walked over to the hut, but not into it—the smell coming from its smashed

window was fairly ripe. Maybe that wasn't where the cats went to sleep, I thought. Maybe it was where they went to die.

On the money I charge, I can't afford to sub-contract. But I do occasionally *sob*-contract—that is, get people to help me earn my living, for free, because they feel sorry for either the cats, or the owners, or both.

John the Ratman is one such friend in need, and the only vegetarian Pest Control Officer I've ever met. A huge, bearded black man, he wears a suit and tie to work, instead of the more obvious boilersuit, because, he says, it shows more respect. To the rats, I think he means.

I gave him a standard sob story about the poor little pussycat lost and bewildered in a cruel world, and its mourning owners, and he more or less insisted on taking the first shift: 10 P.M. to 4 A.M. I volunteered to stand second watch, which was no great hardship. Frankly, if the cat isn't in the box by about 5 A.M., it ain't coming back.

Trapping stray cats requires no skill and a minimum of special equipment. It's basically a waiting game. You set up your humane trap, baited with smelly fish, in a position where the cat is likely to stumble across it during its nocturnal prowlings . . . and then you just sit in your car for a few hours, getting out to check the trap every hour or so. It's cold, boring work, but the worst of it is probably listening to nighttime drivel on the radio.

By the time I arrived to relieve John, the action was over. The trap was on the backseat of the car, complete with occupant. If this wasn't Fluffy, then it was someone doing a pretty good impersonation of Fluffy. As it was, John had trapped and released four other cats and one fox during the night.

Getting a result on the first night out is good news, of course, but it's not undiluted good news. Not to put too fine a point on it, if the job takes a few nights, I can justify a higher fee. Don't think too ill of me: If I'm dealing with a poor white-haired old lady and a truly terrified puss, I'll play it straight. But Fluffy seemed happy enough, curled up in the warmth of the car, and I didn't reckon the Grants would die if they had to wait an extra day. I was starting to think this might be a £300 job, so I drove the cat back to my place, telling John I wanted to get her checked over by the vet before handing her over ("If a job's worth doing . . ."), and then took the rat catcher out for breakfast at the cafe of his choice.

(Though it would probably have been cheaper to pay him, as it turned out; these vegetarians can't half put it away: baked beans, fried bread, tomatoes, doughnuts, tea, mushrooms . . . Who was supposed to be taking advantage of whom here, I began to wonder.)

Also, as it turned out, I really *did* have to take Fluffy to the vet—she had a slight limp. Nothing too bad, the animal doctor assured me; probably the result of a glancing blow from a human foot. I made a mental note to alter the date on the vet's bill so that I could claim it back from the Grants without revealing my delaying tactics.

Fluffy and I enjoyed a pleasant interlude at my palatial slum, during which I phoned Lissa Grant to tell her I'd seen her cat, and hoped to be able to trap it real soon. Did she want me to carry on? Of course she did.

The following night, around 11 P.M., I returned to the Grants' neighbourhood with Fluffy sleeping comfortably in her cage. I parked a couple of streets away from the Grants' house, for obvious reasons, and was just smoking a last cigarette before delivering the guest of honour to her reunion party when I noticed that same boy—the owner of the two boss cats—sitting on the kerb, just where I'd left him two days previously.

"Hey, kiddo," I greeted him. "You're out late." A shrug was all I got for that, so I tried again. "You haven't been sitting there ever since I last saw you, have you?"

"Of course not," he said. "I go inside for my lunch, don't I?"

"Of course," I said. "So you've had lunch. Have you had anything since?"

He shook his head. "I want to keep an eye out for Dad."

"Well, you could do that from the window," I suggested. "And while you keep watch, I'll get you something to eat. All right?" He looked uncertain, so I stuck out my hand for a handshake. "I'm Charlie," I said. "I'm a cat expert."

That caught his interest at least. "Bobby," he said, standing up to accept my handshake.

I cooked him some beans on toast (no sausages; another vegetarian), meanwhile trying to figure out his situation. And what, if anything, I might do about it. I just hoped his parents wouldn't come back suddenly and find me standing in their kitchen wearing an apron.

"How long is it, Bobby," I asked as I dished up, "since your mum went away?"

Through a mouth crammed with Boston's greatest export, he replied, "Not last Christmas. Christmas before. When she couldn't stand Dad's carryings-on anymore." I couldn't tell from the way he said it whether or not he understood what carryings-on she'd meant.

"And she took the cats with her?"

He nodded.

"Rotten cow," I sympathised. That got no reaction, which worried me a little. "And your dad? How long's he been gone?"

Bobby choked on a bean, or something, and took a swig of tea to clear it. "About a week."

While the boy finished his meal, I asked to use the phone and made an anonymous call to the social services night desk. They promised to send someone round as soon as possible.

I had business of my own to take care of, so I left Bobby with another plate of beans, another pot of tea, a suitably violent video in the VCR, and a sincere request not to go outside the house again until daylight. I didn't tell him about the social workers. Didn't want him doing a runner.

My route to the Grants' took me within sight of the bomb site, and just for a moment that old hut caught my eye. And my imagination.

The delayed reunion was triumphant, as these things generally are. Fluffy was positively identified by both owners ("Yes, that's Butch, all right," said Neil Grant, giving the prodigal a cold look), which is always a relief. When I'm going on description alone, mistakes are possible.

Lissa Grant, slightly friendlier than her husband, poured me a small glass of supermarket beer by way of celebration and didn't argue with my demand for three hundred and fifty pounds. Neil would have argued, I'm sure, but I waited until he'd been sent into the kitchen to open a can of Whiskas.

"Who's the cheque to?" she asked, pen poised.

"My company name, please. Charlie WFYC."

"WFYC?"

"Yes. *Will Find Your Cat*." I used to use a cuter name, but I got fed up with knocking on people's doors and saying, "Hi, I'm Feline Fine," and having them say, "So what if you are? Piss off, weirdo."

I waited until both the Grants were together again, Fluffy sleeping peacefully on Lissa's lap, before I told them where I'd found her.

"Matter of fact," I added, draining my glass, "that's where I'm headed again now. That old hut there—there's quite a smell coming from it. I fear there may be more poor little cats trapped inside. Thought I'd check it out." I gave them the modest smile of a man for whom unpaid good deeds are nothing out of the ordinary.

I was waiting about an hour before Neil Grant turned up.

Peering in through the broken window, I watched as he tore maniacally at the rotten floorboards, and as he dug into the earth

beneath the floor, and finally as he dragged the corpse of Bobby's dad out from under its shroud of old sacks.

"You'll never get him in there," I said as I banged the door open and stepped inside the hut.

Grant screamed, stumbled, and fell straight into the new grave.

"Oh, my mistake," I said. "A perfect fit."

Neil Grant was nimbler than I'd have expected. In what seemed like one spasmodic motion, he was up and out of the hole he'd dug, and coming at me, screaming, with his shovel held high in both hands.

I backed away, snatching up a splintered length of plank as I did so.

"I'm warning you, mate," I yelled. "I know judo, kung fu, karate, and I'm a former member of the British Olympic jujitsu squad. You come one step nearer and I'll smash your stinking head in with this plank."

That gave him pause. We stood there for a long moment, each holding our makeshift weapons aloft, each breathing harder than either of us was accustomed to breathing.

Grant's arms grew tired sooner than mine, and he slumped down onto the filthy floor, sobbing.

"Okay," I said. "That's better. Now listen, Neil. I'm not interested in your business here. I'm not a cop. I'm just a cat detective, remember?"

Grant raised his eyes to meet mine and wiped his nose with his sleeve. His eyes now had that look—the look of a man who makes his living in the money markets. "You mean," he said slowly, "there's a deal on the table here?"

"Why not?" I said.

He nodded. "Money, presumably?"

"Right," I said. "Much money."

Grant looked at me for a while, appraising me, as he had done at our first meeting. A deal-maker by profession, it didn't take him long to run through the options. He reached inside his jacket pocket, brought out a Manila envelope, and chucked it over to me. "There's about three grand in there," he said. "Emergency fund. Leaving-on-a-jet-plane money. I've been carrying it with me ever since . . ." He inclined his head towards the corpse.

"So who is he?" I asked, as if I didn't know, picking up the envelope, briefly checking its contents.

"It was an accident," said Grant. "Sort of, anyway. He lived a couple of streets away. Divorced, separated, something like that. I don't know, I never met him." He laughed, shook his head. "My wife did, though. *Many* times. When I found out—well, I just went round to, you know, give him a piece of my mind."

"Foolish extravagance with such a scarce resource," I said. "And then, don't tell me, there was a struggle and blah blah blah."

"Something like that," Grant agreed. "So I went back and got the car, drove him over here. Dumped him. Didn't know what else to do. He'd got a son, you see, who'd have been home from school any minute."

"How did the cat get its wound?" I asked, out of sheer curiosity. For all I knew, Fluffy's role in the drama could have been a coincidence.

"Bloody thing must have followed me out, got in the car without me seeing," said Grant. "Stupid animal loves cars. When I opened the car door again, after dumping that bastard over there, the animal leapt out at me. Scared me half to death. I kicked at it, it ran off. When it didn't come back, I just assumed it was dead. Or sulking, or whatever."

"Much you cared," I said.

"Calling you in was Lissa's idea. Stupid woman—it's not even as if she likes cats, she was just worried about losing face with the cat's owners if she had to tell them she'd lost it. And now, if you'll excuse me," he said, picking up his shovel again, "I have some chores to attend to."

So had I.

In Bobby's back garden I found an ornamental sundial. A cheap fiberglass one, with a detachable head and a hollow shaft. Ideal for hiding Manila envelopes in. Through the living room window, I could see Bobby, asleep on the sofa in front of the TV. So, the social services hadn't arrived yet.

My knock on the door woke him up.

"Only me, I'm afraid," I said, seeing his face fall as he enthusiastically pulled open the unlocked door.

"Oh," he said: "Hello, Charlie. Want some beans?"

"I'll get them," I told him. "Just got to use your phone again first. That okay?"

After making my call—not anonymous this time, too late for all that—I busied myself preparing a midnight feast for me and Bobby. I wasn't sure if we'd have time to eat it. I guessed the police would respond faster than the social services had. I also guessed that they wouldn't dig Bobby's garden up looking for the three grand, even if Grant did tell them about it. They might ask me to turn my pockets out, but when they found no Manila envelope who were they going to believe—a known cat-kicker or a respectable cat detective? Well, cat detective, anyway.

I could come back for the money in a day or three, once the circus had moved on. Not that I'm self-obsessed or anything, but a man has to live, you know? Which only left two loose ends.

"Bobby," I said, scraping most of my beans onto his plate—he'd finished his portion even before I picked up my fork. "I have some bad news for you. Terrible news. Your dad is dead."

Bobby gave a little grin, the way a kid might who's just won on a computer game, and said: "I *knew* he wouldn't just leave me. I *knew* something had happened."

He carried on eating, in a very businesslike manner. He didn't cry. I didn't either, because it wasn't my father who was dead. I bit my bottom lip instead, and cleared my throat a few times.

I could hear a siren. Of course, you can always hear sirens at night, even in the suburbs, but somehow you can always hear the difference between background noise and a siren that's relevant to you.

"There is one bit of good news," I told Bobby.

"Yeah?" He didn't sound disbelieving, despite all he'd been through. That's the difference between child and non-child, I suppose.

"Yeah. I've found you a new cat."

Disappointment darkened the kid's face. "You mean *Fluffy*?" he said, trying to sound polite. And not quite managing it.

"Good heavens, no! I wouldn't insult you like that, would I? No, no—this cat's a real monster, toughest cat I ever met. Name of Butch."

"Butch . . ." said Bobby.

"I'll bring him round as soon as you—well, you know, as soon as you're settled again."

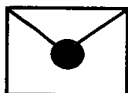
The siren faded, a car pulled up outside. Radios crackled and the gate hinges squealed.

"I'm not sure where I'll be," said Bobby, looking around him, at the wallpaper and the familiar furniture, his eyes wide and shining.

I stood up to open the door, and patted the boy on the shoulder as I passed. "Don't worry," I said. "I'll find you. I'm good at that." ●

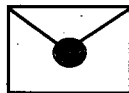
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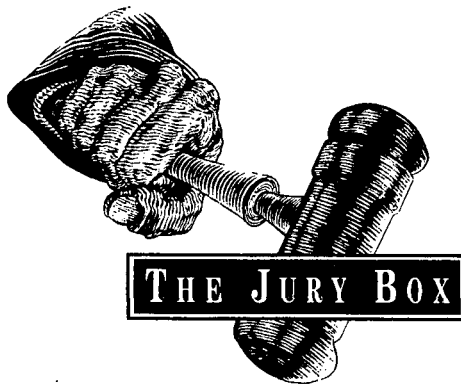


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by Jon L. Breen

Though an American, Edgar Allan Poe, invented the detective story as we know it in 1841, and American writers named Hammett, Van Dine, and Queen made major contributions to its 1920s renaissance, it's generally conceded that writers from other countries, certainly Great Britain and maybe even France, made a greater contribution to the history and development of detective fiction in the years between.

But the U.S.A. was not without important writers between Poe and the roaring twenties. Mystery fans could have a lively argument on the question of which American writer of the period made the most significant contribution to the genre. One could make a powerful case for Anna Katharine Green, perhaps an even stronger one for Mary Roberts Rinehart or Melville Davisson Post. My candidate, though, is the creator of *The Thinking Machine* and author of the classic story "The Problem of Cell 13," Jacques

Futrelle, who despite his Gallic name was a distinctively American writer. Futrelle spun his ingeniously conceived plots, rich in impossible crimes and seemingly supernatural occurrences, in a spare, understated style that dates less than that of most of his contemporaries. Tragically, Futrelle is best-known today for being the most eminent author to go down with the Titanic in 1912. If he'd been able to continue his career beyond the age of thirty-seven, he might have become a towering figure in detective fiction.

The great vogue for accounts of the "unsinkable ship," spurred by James Cameron's impressive film, has included at least two Titanic-based Sherlock Holmes pastiches (a novel by William Seil and a short story by Edward D. Hoch, in which Futrelle plays a secondary role.) It seemed almost inevitable that someone would write a mystery novel set on the ill-fated ship in which Futrelle acted as detective-hero. I'm glad the idea

occurred to a historical mystery writer well equipped to do justice to the concept.

**** Max Allan Collins: *The Titanic Murders*, Berkley, \$5.99. Jack and May Futrelle play pre-WWI Nick and Nora Charleses in investigating the smothering murder of a sleazy blackmailer plying his trade among the first-class passengers. All the suspects are real people, including names like Astor, Straus, Ismay, and the unsinkable Maggie (known to musical comedy as Molly) Brown. While the whodunit is nicely handled, with some elements chosen to reflect mystery fashions of the period, the historical fidelity and the impression of what the great ship was like for its passengers in the days before the iceberg are the novel's strongest attributes. For once, a Titanic story does not focus on the sinking, which is dealt with only in an epilogue, but the reader's knowledge of what is to come gives the account an extra melancholy resonance. No more adventures for this happy detecting couple.

**** Lindsey Davis: *Three Hands in the Fountain*, Mysterious, \$23. The latest Marcus Didius Falco novel, involving a serial killer who leaves body parts in the city's water system, is one of the best in the series, illustrating my belief that the Roman sleuths perform most impressively when they stay home. True, Falco and his highborn wife Helena Justina seem suspiciously like

a twentieth-century couple who time traveled to the ancient world, and only Falco's past visit to Britain can explain all the Yorkshire slang he uses.

*** Jeffrey Ashford: *Loyal Disloyalty*, St. Martin's, \$20.95. The identity of the serial rapist terrorizing an English suburb is known to the reader almost from the start—but will he be found out in time to save further victims? The prolific Ashford (pseudonym of Roderic Jeffries) has been at his trade for almost half a century, having begun his crime-writing career in 1952 as Roderic Graeme, continuing the Black-shirt series begun by his father, Bruce Graeme. He is one of those consistent pros whose solid work may be taken too much for granted. One of the lessons he can teach the more recent crop of writers is economy: He sets the plot in motion, brings the characters to life, and gets them on and off stage in under two hundred pages.

*** Katherine Hall Page: *The Body in the Bookcase*, Morrow, \$22. Given the small town's murder rate in recent years, I'm amazed it takes a string of burglaries to finally get the residents of Aleford, Massachusetts, to start locking their doors. Caterer and clergyman's wife Faith Fairchild again does the detecting in a highly enjoyable novel, based on author Page's own harrowing experience as a burglary victim. Though the subject matter is essentially serious, the cast of humorously

observed characters keep the reader smiling most of the way. Despite the title and jacket illustration, this is not an especially bookish mystery, but there's plenty of interesting background on the antiques trade. (Like the Nancy Pickard and Diane Mott Davidson novels reviewed here a couple of issues back, this one includes a selection of recipes.)

*** Russell Atwood: *East of A*, Ballantine, \$22. New Yorker Payton Sherwood, a pulp-struck, down-at-the-heels loner private eye who takes real-world beatings in his quest for a fantasy existence, has no client in his first book-length case but expends his energy pursuing a girl around Manhattan to get back his prize possession, a Rolex watch. The self-conscious literary references may not be a good idea—at one point Sherwood calls himself "a living pastiche" and at another alludes to being beaten "for five pages"—but the eloquently evoked urban atmosphere marks this as a notable debut. (Atwood is a former managing editor of *EQMM*, and Sherwood made his first appearance in these pages in June 1996.)

** Penny Mickelbury: *Where to Choose*, Simon and Schuster, \$22. Washington, D.C. lawyer Carole Ann Gibson returns to her Los Angeles roots at her mother's behest, when a series of crimes, seemingly ignored by the LAPD, turns her old neighborhood, once a model of Mexican- and African-American co-existence, into an armed camp. Though under-plotted and over-

populated, in the current mode, the novel includes some good character touches, social observations, and background details. Carole Ann, who lost her husband to murder in *One Must Wait*, goes through further traumas in her second case, causing me to realize why I don't care for the pile-on-the-miseries approach so prevalent in recent series mysteries: If you believe in the incidents, the author appears sadistic in giving the characters so much grief; if you don't, the whole saga takes on the unreality of a soap opera. While a series character may (and perhaps should) have a degree of personal involvement in each case, the real horrors should be visited on a fresh set of victims each time.

You may be surprised to find this column recommending a biography of a film director, but Ed Sikov's excellent *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder* (Hyperion, \$35) has much to interest mystery fans. One of Wilder's early screenwriting assignments was a 1931 German film of *Emil and the Detectives*; he collaborated with Raymond Chandler on the script for James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1944); he directed the best film adaptation of Agatha Christie, *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957); and one of his most cherished projects was the honorable failure (commercially) of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970). Wilder is also as intriguing and as prone to contradictions and red herrings as any mystery novel.



THE RIVER'S CHILD

by Joan Richter

From the porch of his small house with its overhang of thatch, Luka watched the African sun set and looked out over his land. The acres of cultivated ground did not fill his thoughts the way they once had, or take him on the backward journey to the days when he was young and strong and had challenged the bush and planted his first crop of maize. This night his thoughts were of Begay, who had been his small wife. The river had brought her to him. The river had her now.

He watched the sun fight its last battle of the day, streaking the sky with all the hidden colors of its fire, but darkness would come soon, and suddenly, as it did on the equator, when the sun drops into the next world. It was only then that Luka said her name out loud. From the shadows of memory he heard her answering voice, and he lifted his hand and stroked the empty air.

"The cora player still sings your story," he called out to the night. "He sings of your life before your river journey, of your second birth and how you became a woman warrior."

Had he not gone to the lagoon that day, the river would have

claimed her. It would have swept her past the great flat rock that jutted out like a shelf into the cove where the women of his village did their wash and the men sometimes went to fish. The river's raging current would have swept her to where rapids swirled and then plunged to the great waterfall.

In the east, the season of heavy rains had begun and he had gone to the lagoon to see how high the water was. The rock where the women spread their clothes to dry was darkly hidden by the rising tide. Only a narrow strip of shore was left where he could stand. Beyond, in the wide channel where the

river surged and foamed, tree limbs and matted balls of leaves and straw swept past. The broken roof of a house sailed by. The roar of roiling water filled his ears.

Then, riding the current like a wildebeest galloping across the plain, the carcass of a giant tree appeared. It swerved, and with tremendous force, plowed into the cove. A wave rose past Luka's knees. The tree would have knocked him over, had the submerged rock not been there. It reared and shuddered from the impact, its tangled branches clawing at the sky. Luka's heart was pounding and a chill swept over him as he stared into the crisscross of twisted limbs. Caught in the tangle was a bloated sheath of straw, the burial shroud of a distant tribe. The great tree rocked from side to side, and the movement spread upward to its limbs, tricking him into thinking something stirred within the shroud.

He closed his eyes and called upon the river to move its cargo quickly on, but when he looked again, the tree was closer than before. The envelope of death was swollen and straining at its seams. A split appeared and through it a small hand reached out. Over the river's roar he heard a whimpered cry.

Around the cook fires and in the fields word spread of the child the river had brought, who from death had cried out Luka's name. They called her Begay, The River's Child, and gave her many stories. It was the cora player who sang of the land from which she had come, far to the east, where fighting had soaked the ground with blood and the smell of death filled the air. She was the child

"Some years ago I was in Gambia, in West Africa, where Alex Haley had traced his roots," writes author Joan Richter. "I met an elderly farmer whom Haley had visited and he took me on a tour of his land and talked about his life. He glanced toward a stand of palm trees in the far corner of his farm, crowded with the nests of hundreds of tiny yellow birds, and explained what they meant to him. This story comes from that experience." ¶

of a warrior who had been killed in battle.

She was lighter than a stalk of dry maize that day when Luka carried her to the village, to the compound where his three wives lived. They had already heard the news. It had traveled more quickly than a man could walk. Still they stared. Nyanza, his first wife, took her from his arms. "Begay, The River's Child," she exclaimed and thereby gave the child her name.

Luka's two younger wives went to the forest to gather roots and herbs for potions of great power. Nyanza bathed the child and fed her strong tea, chanting a song of welcome. When the other wives returned, they put poultices on her wounds. For days the women watched over her, calling her by name. "Begay. Begay. The River's Child." They told her stories about the spirit of the river and of how it had called Luka to its shores. It was from the river that she had been given strength.

The women knew they spoke in a language Begay did not understand, but their words were as much for themselves as for the child. Her ordeal was beyond their imaginings.

At the end of each day, Luka came to sit by the child's side, and told her of the land to which she had been brought. With wide eyes she listened to all the words and song, but for a long time no voice moved past her lips.

"Her spirit is strong, but her body is weak," Nyanza told him. "It will be longer than a growing season before she will be well." As she spoke, her face grew dark and her eyes filled with a sadness he had not seen before. "She will never be like other women. She will be no man's wife. The place in her body meant to accept a man's seed will never nourish a child. It has been plowed like a furrow and destroyed."

Begay grew stronger and she began to repeat the words she heard, and when the season had passed she started to speak the language of Luka's tribe. It was many more seasons before she was well enough to work beside the women in the fields. She planted beans and potatoes and helped to harvest the maize. She did not have the broad flat palms or the wide foot soles of Luka's people, and she would always be small, but they saw she was no longer a child. Luka built her a house in the compound where the houses of his other wives were. He called her his small wife.

On those days when the women took the children to the river to bathe and wash their clothes, Begay walked to the farthest point of land and knelt down by the river. The women saw her lips move. "She speaks to the river spirit," Nyanza said.

In the evenings when Luka was alone, Begay joined him under the overhang of thatch and sat at his side as he looked out over his farm. She liked to hear him talk about the days when he was young and strong and began to work his land. She often asked

him to tell her about the day he had gone to the river and had seen the giant tree riding the current like a wildebeest.

"Did I call out your name?"

He smiled. "If you did, I did not know it. A small voice is what I heard."

There were times when she looked at him with eyes that shone like stars, but then a shadow passed, as when a cloud moves before the moon. He wondered if she had begun to remember more than she would say.

One night the village woke to her screams, so wild and high were they that the weaver birds left their nests and flew shrieking across the sky.

In the morning she asked him, "Why did the birds cry out last night? By day their song is strong but gentle, like the flutter of their yellow wings."

He did not want to tell her it was she who had frightened the weavers, but she pressed him, and he gave her an answer that was true. "It is fear that made the birds cry out."

"But of what are they afraid?"

"Something they do not understand."

One day she asked him if he had ever thrown a spear.

"A long time ago my people were a nation of hunters, skilled with the spear and the bow and arrow, but in my grandfather's time, when the game began to disappear, we had to turn to the earth for food. Maize was the first crop I planted, near where the maize field is now, but it was only a small patch then. I had no hoe or axe, only the *panga*." He looked to where the knife with its wide blade and wooden handle stood beside his doorway. "Every house in the village has a *panga* by its door. It feels right in our hands and it is good for many things." He saw her smile and he laughed, remembering how surprised she had been at all it could do, how she had jumped back, afraid, the first time she saw him split a coconut in two.

"It was all forest then. There were trees to cut down and roots to pull. I cleared it all, except for the palm trees where the weaver birds still build their nests." He looked off to the corner of his land where the cluster of towering palms were the home of many birds. "We are farming people now. We have no need of spears and arrows—only the slingshot, but even that is not meant to kill."

She nodded. "I have watched the lookout. He stays by the maize from dawn until the sun begins to drop, waiting until the last yellow weaver has returned to its nest for the night. He told me he watches for the lead bird. When a leader flies toward the maize, the lookout lets fly a stone. His aim is sharp and true, but your orders are not to maim or kill, only to frighten, so the other birds will not follow and strip the maize field bare."

"When I was young and worked to clear my first piece of ground, it was the birds who woke me in the morning and they who told me when the day had ended. This land is theirs more than mine."

She looked at him and frowned. "That is so, but I have heard that men from the city have been to the farm. It was Nyanza who told me they come because your maize seed is strong. She says they have told you to get rid of the birds."

Luka nodded. "That is true. But they come and then they go. And the land is mine."

"What is it that they would have you do?"

He looked at her and shook his head. "You do not want to know."

"But I do!" She spoke with a defiance he had not heard in her before, and so he answered.

"At nightfall they would have me string a net alongside the field, laying brush alongside. At dawn, without the lookout to scare them off, the birds will fly into the trap."

"And then?"

"They would have me set the brush on fire."

The next day she told him she had asked the lookout to teach her to use the slingshot.

"What use have you for a slingshot?"

"I don't know. It reminds me of something—of a voice and a hand that reached out. The voice said, *Take this, you will need it.* But I don't know whose hand it was, or what it offered."

Luka spoke to Nyanza and told her what Begay had said to him. "Tell me what you think of this."

His first wife looked off to where the silhouettes of the palm trees were dark against the sun. "What I think and what I know are different things. Begay was a child when she came to us. She had known great fear and great pain, but she had no memory. She is a woman now and has more questions than she had before. She has begun to remember. Each day there will be more. That will make her afraid. But she will be strong. She has been given the river's strength."

Without warning, men from the capital came to inspect Luka's farm. They came in a big truck, wearing black uniforms with gold buttons and heavy boots laced to their knees. They marched between the rows of potatoes and beans, as though they were on parade. They pretended indifference to the ripening field of maize, but Luka knew it was the maize they had come to see.

Although he knew they were his enemies, custom made Luka offer them food and drink, beer from a common bowl that was passed from mouth to mouth. One of them drank more than his share and in a loud voice told Luka that until now the land that

he had cleared had been his to plant and harvest in his own way. "Things are changing. Prepare yourself for different times."

While the men had been at the farm Begay had stayed hidden in the shadows of the mango trees. That night he waited for her to come to him, but it was late before he felt her hand on his arm.

"I have been to the river," she said. "There are things I have remembered. I have seen men like those before, before I began my river journey, before I called out your name."

Through the long night she told him about her father and her mother, brothers and sisters and a school to which she had gone. She told him of houses set on fire and of days and nights filled with the screams of torture and slow death and dying. "There was so much blood," she said.

He covered her small hand with his large palm.

"My mother told me that to live I would have to pretend to die, and so in the custom of my people she wrapped me in a blanket of woven straw and sewed it closed. Before she made the last stitch, she put a small sharp stone in my hand and told me to hold it tight. When the time was right I would need it to cut myself free."

In the deepening darkness Luka closed his eyes against the visions Begay had drawn. The stone she spoke of had been in her hand the day he carried her to his village and placed her in Nyanza's arms. "She has it still," Nyanza told him.

Begay stayed with him that night, but at dawn she rose and stood before him, seeming tall. The sun fell in silver stripes on her face, across her breast and to her waist. She had the look of a warrior holding a shield.

"I know it is no longer the custom of your people, but I will learn to use a spear. I will go to where bamboo grows, at the edge of the farm. There I will cut and shape my spears, and practice until my arm is strong and my aim is clear and true."

Luka looked at her. "How is it you know about spears?"

"I was small when my brothers were full grown, but I followed them into the forest when they went to cut the bamboo. They chose it when it was green enough to accept the knife, but not so soft that it would not be hard when it dried. The points they cut were so sharp that not even the skin of an elephant gave them challenge. I pestered them into showing me how to throw. I have not forgotten how."

When he went to Nyanza, she listened in sadness and wonder. "She is a warrior's child, and a child of the river. She will choose her own way."

Another harvest passed and a new season began. With it came distant rumblings, like the coming of locusts, the gathering of storms. Although there was nothing to see, everyone knew it was there. Then, as sudden as a thunder clap, it was upon them. The

government had been overthrown. Unknown men were in command. Proclamations came each day, announcing new and changing laws. Luka was ordered to go to the capital.

In troubled silence the women watched him leave. They had packed him food and water and wished him well. In his absence, they tended to the land as they always did, but they spoke of him more than when he was there. What would he have to tell them when he returned? Would their lives be changed? What if he did not come back?

They had been working in the mango trees and were almost finished for the day when against the nearby sky they saw a moving line of dust and recognized it as the sign of a vehicle coming toward the farm. Begay signaled them into hiding.

The sun was low in the sky and the shadows were long. The weaver birds were already in their nests when a truck drew up beside the maize field and four men stepped out, large in their uniforms and high boots.

The lookout walked toward them, his arm raised in cautious greeting. But with his next step a sharp crack sounded, as when a limb is split, followed by another. From the shadows of the dark-leaved trees the women saw his body jerk and then topple to the ground. In the grip of silent terror they watched.

With a raucous shout each man took his turn stomping on the fallen man. Then without a backward glance they turned to the task that had brought them to the farm. They dragged a roll of netting across the ground and stretched it along the edge of the maize, heaping brush as they went.

For only a moment Begay closed her eyes against the sight of what the dawn would bring—licking flames and tiny beating wings. She thought of Luka, who had saved her from another death. "The birds were here before I came," he'd said.

She waited until the men had gone and then raised her voice above the women's beginning sobs. "They will be back at dawn. There is much for us to do."

She explained her plan and the women moved with her as one. Throughout the night they worked to fell each tall palm. Nyanza led them in a chant of tribal songs that kept their spirits high and helped calm the frightened birds. When the trees were down and the birds dispersed in search of other sites, the women set the abandoned nests on fire, and then, with torches flaming, moved to where the net was strung and lit the kindling the men had laid. A sheet of fire moved across the field. Sparks floated toward the darkened sky.

The same four men returned at dawn and found a smoking field and the trunks of charred and fallen trees. In befuddled rage they raised their guns and fired, looking for an enemy, but it seemed

there was no one there. They stomped among the ashes, shouting threats. Their answer was the mocking call of birds.

Guided by the voices of her brothers, Begay had cut the bamboo and sharpened it according to that memory. Her arm had grown strong. Now, with her weapons at her side, she watched and waited. Her intent was not to frighten, or to maim, but to surely kill. The silence of her spears would keep her hiding place secure and give no warning to her foe.

The first spear flew and the first man fell. The other three, bewildered by their ambush, did not know where to look or what to do. In wild confusion, they raised their guns and fired without direction or design. Begay's second spear found its mark, followed by a third. Only one man was left.

The last spear was in her hand and raised when with the randomness of battle, a stray bullet found her heart.

Luka woke, the night having passed almost without his knowing, so active were his memories that they flowed without interruption into dream. With the dawn the weavers took flight from their scattered nests and filled the morning with their song. No uniformed men had come to his farm since that fateful day. Official word was that they had more important things to do, but everyone knew it was their fear of the river child that kept them away.

"Yes, the cora player sings your story," Luka cried out into the morning. "He tells the story of my small wife, the child of the river who became a woman warrior."

Beside him Nyanza had heard his cry. Since Luka's return from the capital she often joined him under the overhang of thatch. Soon he would ask her to tell him what had happened while he was gone, as he did every morning.

It was awhile before he spoke, but when the question came, she began at the beginning and took the story to its end. "I wove her a sheath of straw and sewed it closed, but before the last stitch was done, I put the small stone in her hand." ●

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THE PROBLEM OF THE SCARECROW CONGRESS

by Edward D. Hoch

By the summer of 1940 the war in Europe was heating up. Dunkirk had been evacuated and Paris had fallen to the Germans on June fourteenth. The RAF was bombing German cities while Englishmen kept a nervous eye on their own skies. In America there was more and more talk that we would be drawn into the war. (Feeling just a bit like a history professor, old Dr. Sam Hawthorne left his chair to pour his visitor another glass of brandy. Then he resumed his seat and continued the story.) But in Northmont that summer, folks were more interested in the festivities planned for the redesigned town square, now christened Congress Park.

The name was actually in honor of the Continental Congress, because a citizen of our area had attended its first session in 1774, to petition the British government for a redress of grievances. It was our main claim to fame during the nation's colonial period, and in the face of impending war the town fathers decided a redesigned and renamed town square would be a patriotic gesture. The new square was more of a park, with a small fountain at the center surrounded by benches. The bandstand which had dominated the old square was gone now, and the entire two-acre park was ringed by thirteen lampposts commemorating the thirteen original states.

One of the pleasures of following a series is seeing the evolution of a place and the characters created to inhabit it. In case you've forgotten, the last Dr. Sam adventure, "The Second Problem of the Covered Bridge," was published in 12/98. With the town's mayor then the apparent victim of a homicide, Hawthorne came to the rescue. In the good doctor's current case, Northmont has a new mayor and a killer at its autumn festival. †

It was the lampposts that gave Mayor Cutler the idea for the Scarecrow Congress. He was a friendly, generous man, owner of the town hardware store and our first mayor to be younger than me. I'd just turned forty-four at the time and he had celebrated his forty-first birthday soon after being chosen mayor by the town council, following Mayor Sumerset's untimely death the previous January. In turn, I'd been appointed to fill Cutler's seat on the council pending the November election, so I was present on that June evening when he proposed his plan.

"I suggest a contest for the thirteen best scarecrows—a symbol of the summer harvest—with the winners to be attached to the thirteen lampposts in Congress Park. We could put them up sometime in July and leave them until Halloween if people wanted."

"We could call it the Scarecrow Congress," Wayne Braddick suggested, and several voices around the table seconded the suggestion. I thought it was a harmless but silly idea, and abstained on the final vote.

In my office the next morning my nurse, Mary Best, asked me how the council meeting had gone. I hadn't been on it long and she still expected me to return after each gathering filled with earth-shaking news. "They're going to build a baseball stadium," I told her, "and try for a major league team."

"Sam!"

I tried again. "They're going to put up scarecrows around Congress Park and call it a Scarecrow Congress."

"Be serious for once!"

"Believe it or not, I am being serious. That's the resolution they passed last night. It'll be in tomorrow's paper."

"Whose idea was that?"

"Doug Cutler's. He's taking this mayoring business seriously."

"You call that serious?"

I shrugged. "Maybe making scarecrows will take folks' minds off the war news."

It was late July before the thirteen scarecrows had been selected and tied to the lampposts in Congress Park. Earlier in the month, on July tenth, seventy German planes had bombed the docks in South Wales and the Battle of Britain had officially begun. Perhaps the scarecrows were becoming a symbol for our town, trying to frighten away the thickening clouds of war.

Mayor Cutler, all smiles, was at the park to cut the ribbon for the official dedication at high noon, announcing a whole series of concerts and contests to be held there during the rest of the summer. Most everyone knew these were designed to replace the former mayor's ill-fated reenactments of famous events marking Northmont's centennial year, a plan that had come to a sudden,

tragic conclusion with the first reenactment.

Early Winters, a dairy farmer with an improbable name, was one of the first entrants in the contest, and his overstuffed scarecrow earned a place of honor out by the street. Towering more than six feet high, it was a favorite from the beginning with its bib overalls, checked shirt, and red bandanna. A smiling face painted on a feedbag stuffed with straw served as the head, topped by a soft and shapeless straw hat, not a hard straw skimmer like I wore myself. A broomstick through the shirtsleeves held its arms outstretched, and tufts of straw served as its hands.

"He's someone I'd like to know," Mary confided as we inspected Early's scarecrow in Congress Park. "He's certainly more appealing than some of the boyfriends I've had."

"I hope you're not including me."

She blushed just a bit. "You're not a boyfriend, Sam. You're my employer."

Wayne Braddick's daughter Jessica had demonstrated her individuality by creating a female scarecrow, complete with breasts, a skirt, and long hair. "Jessica was always a bit different," I commented. The twenty-year-old was an occasional patient of mine, but I'd seen little of her since she went off to college. "She must be home for the summer."

As we reached the last of the scarecrows, a virtual duplicate of the one in 1939's hit movie *The Wizard of Oz*, we came upon Sheriff Lens tugging at the straw man with both hands. "Are you trying to steal it, Sheriff?" Mary wondered.

"What?" He jumped back, startled. "Oh, hello, Mary. Hi there, Doc."

"What are you up to?" I asked.

"Mayor Cutler's afraid some wild kids will steal the scarecrows, or even set them afire. He wants me to station a deputy here all night for the next few months. Hell, I got better things to do with the county budget than guard a bunch of straw! I been tugging at these wires and they all seem secure enough to me. Nobody's gonna make off with them, and the fire department has a volunteer on duty all night right across the street. Even if one of these did get damaged, the mayor had the winners keep duplicates at home to bring in if necessary."

I'd known Sheriff Lens since virtually my first day in Northmont. He was a bit unimaginative and set in his ways, but that didn't mean he was always wrong. "It sounds to me as if they're safe enough. Like you say, you've got more important things to worry about."

As we strolled further along we found Jessica Braddick at her female scarecrow, checking it over for any damage. "Hello, Dr. Sam!" she called out. "Did you see mine?"

We walked over to join her. "That's very clever, Jessica," Mary told her. "How was college this year?"

"Pretty good," she told us. Jessica was very much her father's daughter, though I doubted she'd ever serve on the Northmont town council. She was bound for Boston or New York, with the looks and personality to suit life in the big city.

"Any boyfriends?" I asked her, making conversation as one does with the young.

"Oh, no one serious. The boys at college all seem so immature."

"I've heard that before," I told her as we parted.

That night there was an inaugural concert for the new park, followed by a few skyrockets left over from the Fourth of July. Mary was at a meeting of her library circle so I attended by myself. It was good seeing old friends and patients away from the usual office setting.

Because of the fireworks, Mayor Cutler had Seth Sterne standing by with his ambulance in case of an accident. Seth's ambulance was the only one in town, carefully equipped and upgraded by Seth himself. He was paid to transport patients to and from Pilgrim Memorial Hospital, and rumor had it that he often romanced the nurses on the side. A local kid named McGuire, whom everyone called Sonny, often rode in the ambulance with him and helped to carry the stretchers.

McGuire was with him now, smoking a cigarette with nicotine-stained fingers while he lolled against the side of the ambulance. He was a reedy young man with flaxen hair that always seemed to be in his eyes. "Hello, Seth," I said, walking up to them. "Hi, Sonny."

Sonny grunted a greeting, his eyes on the circulating crowd, but Seth Sterne was as friendly as ever. "Whenever there are fireworks, Doug Cutler wants me out here. Waste of money if you ask me. More likely to need the fire truck than my ambulance."

There were always a few volunteer firemen at functions like this. "There's Early Winters now," I pointed out. "He's a volunteer. And Wayne Braddick with his wife and daughter." Sonny McGuire perked up at this and followed our gaze. He tossed the cigarette butt away and made a beeline for Jessica Braddick. I remembered then that they'd graduated from high school together.

"Do you think Early's scarecrow is the best?" I asked Sterne.

"Who knows? There's no prize riding on it. Early made a good traditional scarecrow. That Braddick girl made a lady scarecrow." He snickered as he said it.

"Sonny probably likes that."

Seth snorted. "Sonny was lucky to make it out of high school. If he thinks he's gonna make time with young Jessica Braddick he's dead wrong. She's busy driving those college boys wild."

"How come you know so much about it?"

"Kids talk. I sit around down at the soda fountain and hear things."

Seth Sterne remained by his vehicle while I walked across the park to speak with Early Winters. He was a small but muscular man with the weathered face of a farmer. His wife had died a few years back in a tractor accident but he'd carried on without her, hiring what help he needed from neighboring farms to keep his place going. "That's a great scarecrow, Early."

"I spent hours on the thing, getting it just right. But then, I have nothing better to do with my evenings since Evangeline passed away."

A skyrocket took off and burst above the park, signaling that the evening's festivities were nearing an end. Two more followed, lighting the sky briefly. I caught a glimpse of Mary across the park talking with Jessica Braddick. The library circle had finished early. I wandered over to one of the nearby lampposts and was surprised to see the name of Constance Cutler attached to scarecrow number seven. She was Mayor Cutler's wife and I had no idea she'd entered the great scarecrow contest. Her straw man was cleverly concocted of familiar household implements, with a rolling pin for a hand and a strainer covering the face. The hair was a stringy mop, the straw feet two brooms.

"Admiring my handiwork?" Constance asked, startling me as she came out of the shadows. She was a formidable woman, a bit taller than the mayor, with a slim body and an unlined face that almost seemed Oriental at times.

"It's very clever," I answered truthfully.

"Doug didn't want me to enter because of being the mayor's wife, but why not? There's no cash prize or anything. It's just the idea of having my scarecrow displayed here for a few months." She fluffed up its moppy hair. "Think it'll last till Halloween?"

"I doubt it. That's a long way off."

Mary Best joined us, and I was a bit surprised that she and Constance Cutler seemed to know each other so well. They chatted awhile and then we parted. "She volunteers at the Red Cross," Mary explained. "I see her there occasionally." As the county seat, Northmont had a small Red Cross chapter.

"What do they need volunteers for?" I asked.

"Not much right now, but we've been talking about the future. If we do get pulled into the war, Red Cross chapters around the country will be rolling bandages, among other things."

We headed back toward my car. "I saw you with Jessica Braddick. What did she have to say?"

"Oh, girl talk. You know. Actually, I was rescuing her from Sonny McGuire."

"I saw him bearing down on her. I guess they graduated from high school together."

"Sure, but now she's in college trying to make something of herself. Sonny just hangs around and rides the ambulance with Seth Sterne. He told her he's worried about getting drafted. There's talk that Congress will pass a Selective Service bill by the end of summer and Sonny will be twenty-one in September."

"If that happens, they'll probably want me too," I told her.

She shook her head as we reached my Buick. "What they're talking about is only drafting men twenty-one to thirty-five right now. Of course, there's always a need for able-bodied doctors."

I knew she was kidding me just a bit, but it was a thought that hadn't occurred to me before.

Two days later, I was just finishing with a woman patient when Mary told me Early Winters was in the waiting room in a highly agitated state. I had a light schedule that morning, and it was almost lunchtime, so I told her to send him in. Early had never been a patient of mine, and I wondered what was ailing him.

He entered my office quickly. In his overalls and plaid shirt he looked a bit like a smaller version of his own scarecrow. "Doc, you've got to help me. I think someone's trying to kill me."

"Sit down, Early. Tell me what's happened."

He took the chair opposite my desk. "I got up this morning and discovered someone had broken into my house overnight. They left this on my kitchen floor." It was a straw doll, like an Indian child's toy, with a straight pin driven through its heart. "Is it some sort of voodoo curse?"

I smiled at the idea, though I couldn't come up with any immediate explanation for the doll. "Was anything taken from your house?" I asked.

"Not that I noticed. The window in the kitchen door had been broken and whoever it was simply reached in and turned the knob from inside. The door was still slightly ajar when I came down for breakfast."

"But you heard nothing?"

Winters shook his head. "I'm a pretty heavy sleeper. My wife always said I could sleep through an earthquake."

I sighed and shook my head. "Early, I'm a doctor. You need Sheriff Lens for this."

"He wasn't in his office, and I thought you might help. You've solved a good many mysteries around these parts."

"I don't think I can help. It was probably just a prank by someone who resents all the attention your scarecrow is getting. I don't think this straw doll is meant to be a person. It's meant to be your scarecrow."

"I hadn't thought of that," he admitted, calming down a bit. He returned the straw doll to his overalls pocket.

I rose from my chair, a gentle signal that the conversation was ending. "It's just about lunchtime. If I see Sheriff Lens, I'll tell him you're looking for him."

Mary Best joined me for lunch, as she often did when neither of us had other engagements. We ate at the new Sweet Shoppe across the street from Congress Park, and I could see a small but steady stream of folks strolling around to the various scarecrows mounted on their lampposts. Seth Sterne's ambulance came by and stopped while Sonny McGuire ran into the Sweet Shoppe for a couple of chocolate ice cream cones.

We lingered over lunch, and as we were leaving I saw Sonny bearing down on Jessica Braddick once more. They were across the street from us, at the entrance to the park, and Mary saw them too. "I guess I'd better go rescue her again." She left my side and hurried across the street.

I watched the whole thing with some amusement, but Sonny seemed alarmed about something. He kept gesturing at Early Winters's scarecrow until Jessica and Mary went over to look at it. Just then Seth Sterne pulled up in his ambulance. "What's the trouble?" I heard him ask, but I couldn't catch their replies.

Seth was at the scarecrow now, trying to reach under the bib overalls the straw man wore. "Get the stretcher, Sonny," he called out, a hint of alarm in his voice as he tried to free the scarecrow from its post with a pair of wire cutters.

I started across the street to join them. "What's going on there?" I called out.

Seth and Sonny McGuire had freed the scarecrow now and were carrying it on the stretcher to the ambulance. It seemed like a sight out of some bizarre version of *The Wizard of Oz*. Seth poked his head around the ambulance door to answer me. "Sonny noticed the scarecrow was bleeding. I think there's a person inside."

I pushed the door aside and joined them. Seth was unhooking the buttons of the bib overalls, pulling the top down to reveal more blood. "Out of my way," I said, pushing them unceremoniously aside. Mary and Jessica were crowding in behind me, and others were joining the group. "Keep the crowd back."

It was a small man's body inside the scarecrow, and it appeared he'd been shot through the heart. Working within the confines of the ambulance, I tore away the painted feedbag face of the scarecrow and looked upon the dead face of Early Winters.

He'd been in my office, alive and well, just an hour earlier. Sheriff Lens arrived within minutes, summoned by the cashier at the Sweet Shoppe who saw the excitement. "What's going on here, Doc?" he asked.

"Early Winters has been murdered," I told him. "His body is inside the scarecrow."

"I'll be damned! You mean someone managed to get the body in there during the night?"

I shook my head. "Winters was in my office an hour ago. He wanted to report a break-in at his house and couldn't find you. Besides, the body's still warm. He hasn't been dead long."

"Then how'd he get in the scarecrow?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "We'll take him to the hospital in case there's any chance of reviving him, but I'm sure he's gone. Follow along and we'll question Sonny McGuire there. He's the one who noticed the blood."

At Pilgrim Memorial they pronounced Early Winters dead on arrival and quickly confirmed that he'd been killed by a single shot to the heart. Mary and Jessica had followed along too, and Sheriff Lens herded us all into a small conference room while he questioned Sonny. "Just tell us what happened," he urged the young man.

Sonny McGuire, nervously biting his lower lip, began to speak. "I was with Seth in the ambulance and we stopped at the Sweet Shoppe so I could run in for a couple of ice cream cones. They taste good on a warm day."

"What about the scarecrow?" Sheriff Lens prodded.

"Well, we'd finished our cones and Seth wanted to drive back to the garage, but I spotted Jessica here across the street. I hopped out of the ambulance and ran across to say hello." Jessica's face had turned red at his words. "That was when I noticed that Winters's scarecrow was bleeding."

"You actually saw the blood flowing?" I asked.

"That's right," he replied. "It was running down the front of those bib overalls."

"I saw it too," Mary confirmed. "When I crossed the street to join them, they were both looking at it."

"Yes," Jessica said softly. "I never saw a dead man before. When Dr. Sam pulled that sack off his head and I recognized Mr. Winters, I felt like I was going to faint."

"All right," the sheriff said. "Let's not get ahead of the story. What happened after you all saw the blood?"

"Seth pulled the ambulance around to see what was going on," Sonny continued.

Seth Sterne took up the story then. "Sonny pointed out the fresh blood on the scarecrow's bib overalls and I put my hand under them to feel around. I got inside the shirt and I could feel skin, and a wound. That's when I told him to get the stretcher out of the ambulance. I cut the wires, and Sonny helped me lower the body onto the stretcher. I didn't want to examine it further with Mary

and Jessica there, and others were coming up too. We got it into the ambulance and by that time Dr. Sam had come over."

I nodded. "I opened the shirt and saw the wound. I was pretty sure he was dead. Then I pulled off the feed sack with its painted face and saw that it was Early Winters."

"The same Early Winters who was in your office an hour before that."

"The same," I said with a sigh. "I know it's impossible."

Sheriff Lens just shook his head. "Even by your standards this one is impossible, Doc. It's unlikely Winters's body could have been put in there during the night without someone seeing something, and it's downright impossible during the day. There're always people around the park. It's the center of town!"

Sonny McGuire looked at me and suggested, "Maybe it was his ghost that came visiting you."

"It was no ghost. He brought along a straw doll with a pin stuck in its heart. Someone broke into his house during the night and left it on the floor."

The sheriff's questioning was interrupted by the arrival of Mayor Cutler. "What's happened here?" he demanded. "Folks are telling me Early Winters was shot and his body put into the scarecrow."

"That's what happened," I confirmed. "But we don't know exactly how."

"I won't let something like this ruin our new Congress Park," Cutler sputtered. "Sheriff, I want the murderer in custody by nightfall. We can't have people afraid to walk the streets of Northmont!"

"A man is dead," I reminded him. "I'm sure Sheriff Lens is doing his best to get to the bottom of it."

"He'd better, or the town will be looking for a new sheriff! I'm not as easygoing as my predecessors."

Cutler stormed out of the room, leaving us speechless for a moment. We'd never seen him like that before. Sheriff Lens was the first to recover his voice. "I guess that's all for now. I'll probably have more questions later."

Between patients, Mary and I spent much of the afternoon discussing the murder of Early Winters. "What we need is a motive," I told her. "If we can figure out who wanted Early dead maybe we can determine how it was done."

She thought about it. "I don't think he had a close friend or an enemy in recent years. Since his wife's accident he's stayed pretty much to himself."

"What about that accident? Didn't a tractor tip over while she was driving it up a hill?"

Mary Best nodded. "Her leg was trapped underneath and broken. But it was a broken neck that killed her."

"I remember there was some uproar over it at the time."

"A close woman friend claimed Evangeline had been beaten by her husband on occasion. She wanted Sheriff Lens to investigate the death as suspicious, but nothing ever came of it."

"You've got a good memory for these things, Mary. Who was the woman friend?"

"Constance Cutler, the mayor's wife."

I decided it was time to call on Mrs. Cutler, whom I knew only slightly. Our brief conversation about her scarecrow was probably the longest talk I'd ever had with her. I left the office early and drove out to the large house on Maple Street. It was one of the handsomest homes in town, with a wide front porch that circled around both sides. She'd decorated it with all sorts of blossoming flowers in just the right shades to add color to the grayness of the house itself.

When I drove up, she was watering the flowers with a metal sprinkling can, squinting into the late afternoon sun to identify her visitor. Her frown of uncertainty changed to a smile when she recognized me. "Dr. Hawthorne, this is indeed a pleasure! I heard about the terrible tragedy at Congress Park."

"That's what I wanted to talk about," I admitted, removing my straw hat as I stood at the bottom of the steps awaiting an invitation to proceed further. "I'm trying to help out a bit by searching for a motive for the killing. Do you happen to know anyone who disliked Early Winters enough to kill him?"

She shook her head. "Not really."

"His wife died in a terrible accident a couple of summers ago."

"Evangeline, yes."

"You knew her?"

"Very well."

"Could there be any connection between her death and his?"

"Oh, I doubt that."

"I saw him this morning before he was killed. Someone broke into his house last night and left a little straw doll on the floor. It had a pin through the heart, like a voodoo doll."

"Who would do a thing like that?" she asked, the shock of it reflected in her face.

"Probably the killer, since Winters was shot through the heart."

"Could I see this straw doll?"

I didn't have it with me, and I realized I wasn't sure just where it was. "I'll try to get it and show it to you. In the meantime, is there anything you can tell me? Is it possible that Early might have killed Evangeline two years ago?"

"I don't know," she answered simply. "That's something we'll never know now."

I thanked her and returned to my car, aware that she hadn't invited me up onto the porch.



After throwing together a quick dinner for myself, I went out again, this time back to Pilgrim Memorial Hospital. I didn't stop at my office in the darkened physicians' wing but went instead to the admitting desk. I was looking for the clothing Early Winters had been wearing when Sterne delivered his body to the hospital.

"We've got two sets of clothing here," the admitting nurse told me. "We're waiting for a family member to claim them."

"Two sets?"

"One from the scarecrow and one from the body inside it."

"I'm interested in the body's clothing."

She took out a cardboard box and placed it on the counter. I remembered Early putting the straw doll in his overalls pocket and that was the first place I looked, but it wasn't there. Both the overalls and the plaid shirt were stained with blood around the bullet hole, but there was no sign of the doll. "Could I see the other box?" I asked.

But there was nothing in the scarecrow's overalls pockets either. I ran my fingers over the smooth unmarked fabric of the bib and tried to make sense of it all. One other place the straw doll might be was in Seth Sterne's ambulance. I hadn't thought to look there.

I thanked the nurse and went back to my car. Seth parked his ambulance in a garage behind his house so he could go out on night calls if necessary. It was dark by the time I reached his street, but though the lights were on in his living room, I didn't stop at his house first. Seth was unmarried but had a reputation with women. I didn't want to intrude on something that might prove embarrassing. I went around the barrel used for burning trash in his backyard and headed for the garage. The side door was standing slightly ajar.

I entered that way and used the street light from outside to guide myself to the back doors of the ambulance. I searched around, mostly by hand, and found nothing. The empty stretcher was in place and nothing else seemed disturbed. Suddenly, I heard the door behind me squeak as it swung open. Desperate for a hiding place, I pulled myself onto a long narrow supply shelf beneath the one on which the stretcher rested. Sterne had designed it for first-aid equipment or for an extra stretcher if needed. Lying there with the ambulance door ajar, I heard footsteps cross the floor. The ambulance doors swung shut without quite latching.

Almost at once I heard the side door squeak again and a voice I recognized said, "Hello there, Sonny. I thought I might find you around here."

Sonny's voice answered a bit uncertainly. "What? Mr. Braddick! What are you doing here?"

"I came to have a word with you," the councilman replied. "About my daughter."

I remained where I was, hardly daring to breathe.

"What about her?" Sonny whined. "I didn't do anything to her."

"I want to make sure you don't. Jessica is going into her third year of college now. I don't want anything to interfere with that. Whatever might have been between you in high school is over and done with. Understand?"

"There was nothing between us."

"I've been watching how you follow her around. Just keep this in mind, boy. If you ever lay a finger on my daughter, I'll come after you with my deer rifle. It makes a pretty big hole!"

A sound that might have been another whine came out of Sonny. Wayne Braddick said nothing more, and I couldn't be sure if he was still there or not. Then suddenly I heard a shot.

I kicked open the ambulance doors and pushed myself out, a foolish move that might have cost me my life. But there was only Sonny McGuire on the garage floor now, lying in a widening pool of blood. I ran to him and felt for a pulse, but I was already too late. The bullet had taken him in the heart, just like the one that killed Early Winters.

I roused Seth, who was, fortunately, alone in his house, and put in a call to Sheriff Lens. Two murders in one day were a bit too much for Northmont to handle, and I wasn't too surprised to see Mayor Cutler drive up just behind the sheriff's car.

"Were you here when this happened?" the mayor asked me while Sheriff Lens was examining the body on the garage floor.

"I was. I heard Sonny talking with someone and then I heard a shot."

"Did you recognize the voice?"

"Pardon me, Mayor, but I'd rather the questioning came from Sheriff Lens."

He glowered at me and walked away. One of Lens's deputies had arrived and was photographing the scene before the body was removed. In Sonny's pocket he found what looked like a gun, but it was only a water pistol. The sheriff studied it, shrugged, and strolled over to ask me what the trouble with the mayor was all about.

"Nothing serious. I just thought you should be handling the questioning."

"Do you know who shot him, Doc?"

"Wayne Braddick was in here just before the shooting, telling Sonny to stay away from his daughter. He made a threat."

"Where were you?"

"Hiding in the ambulance. I came here searching for that straw doll."

"You should have asked me," he said. "It's back at my office. I picked it up as evidence."

Mayor Cutler would not be kept away. "Is this killing connected with the murder of Early Winters?" he demanded to know.

"We won't be sure until we compare the bullets," Sheriff Lens told him. "We may have to send them to the FBI lab in Washington. There's no one around here with the equipment for that sort of work."

Seth Sterne shook his head sadly. "I'm certain I locked that side door tonight."

"It was unlocked when I arrived, and Sonny followed me in within minutes," I said. "Did he have a key for it?"

"Well, yes, in case the ambulance was needed when I was away from the house. I suppose he might have come out here for something."

I turned to look at Sheriff Lens. "We'd better go talk to Wayne Braddick," he said.

The mayor was on that remark in an instant. "Braddick? What's he got to do with it?"

"Dr. Sam heard him threatening Sonny just before the shooting."

"I can't believe that. Why would he threaten a kid like Sonny?"

"To warn him away from Jessica," I said. I left the mayor standing there and followed Sheriff Lens out of the garage.

Wayne Braddick saw us arriving and met us at the door, switching on the porch light as we approached. "I just heard on the radio that there's been another killing. Somebody shot that McGuire boy."

"That's right," the sheriff confirmed. "We want to talk with you about it."

Braddick glanced around nervously. "We can talk here where we won't disturb my wife and daughter."

I didn't want to entrap him into making a false statement so I laid our cards on the table. "Wayne, I was in Seth's garage tonight. I heard you threaten Sonny just before he was shot."

"You—? I didn't see you."

"I was in the ambulance. I heard a shot not a minute after you stopped talking."

"Then you must have heard me drive away before that shot."

I hadn't, but I couldn't swear that he'd still been there when Sonny was killed. "Did you have a gun with you?" the sheriff asked him.

"Of course not! That was just a threat I made. You must know I'm not a violent man."

"A threat to one's family can turn many peaceful men violent," I pointed out.

Jessica came downstairs then, attracted by our voices. "What is it, Daddy? What's happened?"

"Sonny McGuire has been killed," he told her. "Go back upstairs. I'll be up in a minute."

"Sonny? Dead?" Her face seemed to mirror more surprise than shock at the news. She looked from one face to another, waiting for more information. Then she turned and ran up the stairs.

"She'll be all right," her father said.

"Who would have wanted both Early Winters and Sonny dead?" I asked.

"I have no idea."

I glanced toward the kitchen and suddenly froze. Propped up against the refrigerator was Jessica's female scarecrow with its breasts and long hair. "What—?"

Braddick managed a soft chuckle. "I told her she can't leave it there till fall."

Then I remembered. Mayor Cutler had wanted duplicates made in case of vandalism. "Of course," I muttered, grabbing onto Sheriff Lens. "Come on, Sheriff. We have another call to make."

We spent twenty minutes searching Early Winters's house, concentrating on the basement and the garage. Then we checked the barn and outbuildings, the glow from the lights illuminating only empty stalls. His neighbors had taken in the livestock.

"It's not here." I decided finally.

Sheriff Lens scratched his head. "Maybe he didn't make one, Doc."

"Of course he made one."

"I don't see why that's important."

"Remember the straw doll?"

"Sure, but I—"

"Come on, Sheriff."

The last of the deputies' cars had left Seth Sterne's house by the time we returned. There were still lights on in the house, and in the darkness I didn't see him in the backyard until there was a sudden flare of a match at the burning barrel. Then I was out of the car and running toward it. "Don't do it, Seth!"

"Doc! He's got a gun!" Sheriff Lens shouted as flames shot up from the burning barrel.

Seth Sterne fired and I dropped to the ground. There was an answering shot from the sheriff, aimed at the flash of the gun. Seth gasped and I saw him go down. We both reached him at the same time and I kicked the gun away. The bullet had caught him in the side and he was trying to stanch the flow of blood. "You killed me!" he cried out.

"No such luck," I told him. "You'll live to stand trial for two murders. Sheriff, stamp out that fire while we still have some evidence left."

"What was he trying to burn?"

"Early Winters's scarecrow from Congress Park."

We took Seth to the hospital in the sheriff's car, with the siren shrieking. While they wheeled him into the operating room to probe for the bullet, we talked about the murders in the waiting room.

"You'll still have to work on the motive," I said, "but with Seth's reputation as a ladies' man, you may come up with evidence that he was friendly with Evangeline Winters. Whether true or not, I think Seth suspected Early of killing his wife or at least contributing to her death. When Early's scarecrow was chosen to be shown in Congress Park, Seth found a way of getting revenge by committing the perfect crime, or so he thought."

"The perfect impossible crime?"

"It wasn't meant to be impossible," I told him. "Seth had no way of knowing that Early would come to me when he found that straw doll on his kitchen floor. If I hadn't seen him alive an hour before his body was found, it might have appeared he'd been killed during the night, at least until an autopsy was performed and the time of death established."

"Why was the straw doll left on his kitchen floor?"

"That's what I asked myself, Sheriff. Why risk breaking into the house when the doll would have served the same purpose if left outside on the steps? The answer came to me almost at once. The doll was left for misdirection, to hide the fact that the house had been broken into for another purpose. Yet nothing seemed to have been taken. It wasn't till this evening at Jessica's house when I saw her duplicate scarecrow that it came to me. The person who broke into Early's farmhouse left the straw doll but stole the duplicate scarecrow."

"Seth?"

"More likely his accomplice Sonny. If Seth had broken into the house, he probably would have gone upstairs and killed Early then and there. But Sonny brought back the scarecrow as ordered and Seth used some excuse to lure Early to his house. Seth shot him through the heart and then Sonny helped put the body inside the duplicate scarecrow. Early was a small man, remember, so it wasn't too difficult. Then they put that scarecrow on the stretcher in the ambulance and drove to the park, not knowing that I'd seen the dead man just before lunch."

"How'd they get the scarecrow onto the lamppost without anybody noticing?"

"They never did, Sheriff. Early's body was never inside the scarecrow on the lamppost."

"The blood—"

"Sonny squirted it, or a reasonable facsimile, from his water pis-

tol as he walked by the scarecrow. Then he called attention to the blood and Seth swung his ambulance around right on schedule. Seth confirmed there was a body in the scarecrow and immediately produced a pair of wire cutters to snip it free. That should have told us something. How many ambulance drivers carry wire cutters in their pocket?"

"So he and Sonny carried the scarecrow on the stretcher to the ambulance. Then what?"

"While the ambulance doors partially blocked our view, they slid the empty scarecrow onto the bottom storage shelf and hid it from view. Then Seth started working on the duplicate scarecrow with Early's body inside. I even helped him uncover the body and declared Early dead, never realizing a substitution had been made."

"How can you be so sure that's what happened?"

"When I came here to the hospital earlier searching for that missing straw doll, I checked Early's coverall pockets and the scarecrow's too. They'd forgotten to squirt blood on the scarecrow's bib overalls, and it hadn't soaked through from inside. There was blood on Early's shirt and overalls, but not on the scarecrow's bib. It didn't match the one they removed from the lamppost. When I remembered that, I knew there'd been a substitution."

"Why did he kill Sonny?"

"The young man had to be his accomplice, of course. Even though Early Winters was small, he had muscles and weighed well over a hundred pounds. Sonny would have known there was no body inside the scarecrow they carried to the ambulance. And he would have seen Seth hide the scarecrow on the lower shelf below the duplicate containing the body. Seth was probably looking for an opportunity to get rid of a dangerous accomplice. When he overheard Wayne Braddick threatening Sonny in the garage tonight he had the perfect opportunity. He may have brought the gun with him when he heard voices in his garage. As soon as Wayne left, Seth shot Sonny. He might have testified later that he saw Wayne's car leaving the scene."

The sheriff nodded. "That gun should be enough to make our case."

A surgeon had come out of the operating room. He was a young man I barely knew. "I've got good news," he said with a smile. "We were able to remove the bullet and Mr. Sterne should stage a full recovery."

"Now the county has to pay for a trial," Sheriff Lens grumbled. ●



MURDER MOST SWEET

by O'Neil De Noux

P pausing just inside the door of the Red Wolf Cafe, the sultry brunette looks around as she shifts her weight from one leg to another. She wears dark sunglasses, a snug-fitting maroon dress, black high heels, and black lipstick. She's definitely not the doctor I'm waiting for as I sit at the Formica counter sipping my strong coffee and chicory.

She moves to the counter and sits two stools away. Tall, she must be five ten, five eleven. The eager short-order cook, a frizzy-headed boy with a genuinely friendly smile, steps up and asks if he can help her.

She orders a coffee and looks around the cafe again. The only other occupants, two elderly men sitting in a corner booth, smile at her when she looks their way. She turns her expressionless face to me and taps her sunglasses down as she notices the bulge beneath my shirt.

My white dress shirt is unbuttoned and worn out over my black T-shirt and jeans. My nine-millimeter Beretta, tucked in the waistband of my jeans at the small of my back, is probably

protruding. I sit up straighter.

The cook places her coffee in front of her and asks if there's anything else she needs. She shakes her head, takes a sip of the strong coffee and chicory, and immediately reaches for cream and sugar. A thick slurp of cream and two heaping teaspoons later, she pulls her sunglasses off and focuses her light green eyes on me and says, "Are you Detective Beau?"

I smile and reach my hand out. "John Beau," I tell her. "And you must be Dr. Cross."

"Christine Cross. But call me Chris." She takes my hand and laughs a lilting, sexy laugh as she scoots over to the stool next to me. A woman named Chris Cross. How will I ever be able to resist? She tugs her dress down as she crosses her legs. I try not to look at her long legs as she reaches for her coffee.

She leans close and says, conspiratorially, "You don't look like a homicide detective."

The last thing she looks like is an M.D., but why mention the obvious?

"What should a homicide detective look like?"

"Older."

I've never been good at guessing ages, especially a woman's, but she seems to be around my age, around thirty, maybe a year or two younger. I catch a whiff of her perfume and it's nice, very nice. She pulls back and the scent fades and dies a second later as the short-order cook starts grilling an onion omelet.

"I'm so glad you agreed to meet me," she says. Her long hair falls across the right side of her face. She leaves it and I wonder who told her I grew up with a crush on Veronica Lake.

"The pecan pie here is *to die for*," she says.

"What?" Oh no. Not an uptowner.

"I'm an amateur chef," she volunteers. "And the pecan pie here is *to die for*."

I take a sip of my black coffee. She takes a sip of hers.

"So, what part of uptown are you from?" I ask.

She smiles again. "Is my accent that obvious?"

"No. The only people within a hundred miles who use 'to die for' are New Orleans uptowners."

An editor for *New Orleans Stories* magazine and a former editor for *Pulphouse*, O'Neil De Noux is familiar with many styles of short-story writing. When he put his writer's hat on this time, it was with something different in mind (as he's known for hard-boiled police tales)—a drawing room mystery straight out of Agatha Christie. The atmosphere of the bayou and some clever clueing make his tale unique. †

"You're from here, aren't you?"

I nod, knowing my Cajun accent hasn't diminished, even if I've lived in New Orleans for the last eight years.

She takes another sip of coffee and I wonder when she's going to get to the point. Instead, she surprises me again by reaching over and brushing my hair away from my ear.

"They let you wear your hair this long at NOPD?"

"No. But NOPD's got more important problems than worrying about my hair. I like it long."

"Me too."

She brushes my hair back over my ear and I'm thinking, *I've known her less than three minutes and she's already touching me. My kinda woman!*

She looks around again.

I point to a booth next to the front window. "Maybe we'd be more comfortable . . ."

"Yes." She bounces off her stool and scoops up her coffee and sunglasses, and I follow her with my own cup. I sit across from her and wait for her to restart the conversation.

She brushes her hair out of her face and looks outside. I do too, at the tall cypress trees across narrow Highway 82. A south Louisiana breeze raises the long Spanish moss dangling from the trees like waves on an ocean. It's good to be home for a while, good to be away from the mean streets and constant murders of the big city.

"As I told you on the phone," she says, "your uncle's in bad shape."

"Great-uncle."

"He wants to spend his last Thanksgiving with relatives. I'm glad you could make it."

I finish my coffee and wave at the cook, who's watching us. He waves back and heads for the coffeepot.

"What's wrong with Uncle Byron?"

"He's ninety-two." She takes in a deep breath and tells me it's old age, hypertension, and a host of other problems—medical names I don't catch as I watch her lips and that black lipstick.

The cook arrives and refills my cup. He tops hers off too. And I remember something she said.

"You said *relatives*. As in plural. Who's going to be there?"

"Your aunt Rose, uncle Sabin, and several cousins, including an angry one named Sam."

"Sam LaCaze." I shake my head. "He's still alive?"

"He's only about fifty." She's surprised.

"Just figured someone woulda killed him by now."

She smiles and pours more cream in her coffee.

"I just left them all and it's strange. Your great-uncle wants all the relatives who hate him with him for Thanksgiving."

"Hate?" I pick up my coffee and take a sip.

"He says you hate him too."

I have to laugh at that. "I haven't seen him since high school. He's an annoying man, but hate's a strong word."

A loose strand of hair falls across her right eye. She leaves it, her left eye staring at me now.

"Your uncle says you hate him because he never gave your father any money."

I feel an instant flush on my neck.

"My father's been dead ten years."

She nods. "Your aunt Rose told me."

My great-uncle Byron was always the family son-of-a-bitch. My father didn't have much to do with him. Actually, we had little to do with anyone in the family, living in our cabin on Bayou Brunet, just off Vermilion Bay. I grew up in a Cajun cabin on a brown-water bayou. It was a good life. The best. Just me and my dad and mom.

Dr. Cross clears her throat and brings me back to the Red Wolf Cafe. She's staring at me again as she takes a sip of coffee, then purses her lips.

"Does my great-uncle like you?"

She nods. "For the moment. But I understand he fires doctors quicker than Steinbrenner fires managers."

Ah, a Yankees fan.

I take another drink of coffee, then ask, "Is this why you wanted to meet me here, instead of at my uncle's? To tell me he's dying and hates almost everyone?"

She leans forward and says in a low voice, "I think someone's going to kill him. This weekend."

This weekend?

Murder at Thanksgiving?

I sit back and wonder how in hell I ended up in something out of Agatha Christie. I guess it's on my face, because she keeps nodding as she pulls back and finishes her coffee.

"We can go now," she says. "If you're finished." She climbs out of the booth, scootches her dress down, and adds, "It's on me." She heads for the cash register.

I toss a couple of bucks on the table and wonder how I manage to get myself into these things. I move past her to the coatrack and grab my lightweight gray riding jacket. She turns to me as I put it on and smiles again, and something in my head tells me to go straight back to New Orleans. Now.

Dr. Christine Cross moves up to me, right up to my face, and I smell her perfume again. She blinks and says, "You're about six two, aren't you?"

I nod.

"I like a man with a square jaw," she says as she puts her sun-

glasses back on. She leans even closer and I see a brown shade to her lipstick now, so I have to ask.

"What color is your lipstick?"

She smiles. "Cappuccino." Turning, she heads for the door.

I snatch my helmet off the cigarette machine and dig my own dark sunglasses from inside as I follow her hips out into the bright sunlight.

No, I don't drive my Yamaha back to New Orleans. I follow her yellow BMW down Highway 82 to the cutoff just before the village of Cannes Bruléé and on to my great-uncle's house, the smell of the swamp in my nostrils, the taste of home in the thick, humid air.

I have to follow her. If someone does murder that nasty old man who married my great-aunt, I'll do what I do best. I'll shoot 'em. No, I'll solve the murder.

Yeah. Right!

The BMW decelerates as we cross Crooked Bayou and I follow it around to the narrow road that leads through more cypress woods to my great-uncle's house. A rambling wooden house, it looms on a rise off to my right and stands brooding as we approach. Painted white, with yellow trim, the light colors do little to liven the place. Neither do the veranda and gingerbread wooden trim and Victorian spires on each end of the place.

The good doctor parks her BMW next to a dark green, rusty pickup. I see two other cars parked beyond. I kill the engine and glide my Yamaha next to the BMW and force myself not to look as Chris Cross climbs out of the BMW, knees high.

Pulling off my helmet, I stretch. Chris Cross wiggles over, tugging her dress down. I hear a high-pitched cry and turn as my aunt Rose steps out on the veranda. She beams at me and opens her plump little arms.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" my aunt cries as she bounces on her toes. I smile at her and move to the front steps.

"John Raven Beau! I can't believe it's you. You're . . . so grown up."

She wraps those little arms around my waist and gives me a good squeeze. At five feet, Aunt Rose is as wide as she's tall, with steel-gray hair (in a bun, naturally) and matching gray eyes. She wears a standard-issue grandmother's dress, a print with little blue flowers. She smells like flour and sugar. And I remember—her blackberry pie (to die for!).

Pulling back, she says, "Let me look at you. You're even more handsome than your father." She makes the sign of the cross.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and Chris Cross has arrived.

She says something about how cute I am, too, and Aunt Rose agrees. I leave them there on the veranda and slip into the big house.

The place smells of lemon cleaner. The air-conditioned air is

brisk and feels good on my damp T-shirt as I pull off my jacket. I step into the living room and four sets of eyes turn to me.

Aunt Rose rushes in and introduces me to my second cousin Lorraine (mid fifties, short gray hair, pretty blue eyes, and a warm smile), my second cousin Josh (I never heard of a Cajun named Josh, either. Says he's from Texas, which explains it, I guess. At five feet, he's a shrimp of a man with a pencil-thin moustache and brown eyes that constantly blink), my third cousin Constance (also mid fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair; she's so shy she won't look me in the eye), and my fifth cousin Ty (in his twenties, he looks as out of place as I feel; he doesn't take the headphones away from his ears as he sits in an easy chair bopping his head to rap music).

Sam LaCaze steps in behind me and I turn and face him. He scowls at me and brushes past Aunt Rose to take the only open chair in the living room. At six three, Sam is a barrel-chested, fifty-something-year-old perpetual grump. His salt-and-pepper hair is cut in a regulation Marine Corps flattop. He was never in the Corps.

Uncle Sabin waves at me and I move over to the old man as he sits in a far corner. In his eighties, Sabin is a craggy-faced, olive-skinned man with soft green eyes and a thick mane of white hair. I lean over and kiss him on both cheeks, and he nods and calls me by my father's name, Calixte, then tells me to go back and let him sit in the sunlight.

He's in the darkest corner of the room.

I look back at Aunt Rose and she shakes her head.

I pat Uncle Sabin on the shoulder. "Can I get you something to drink or something?"

"May no. Just get outta my sunlight."

Aunt Rose waits until I get back to tell me Sabin had a stroke last year. She leans close and says, "He thinks John Kennedy is still president."

"What's wrong with that?"

My aunt chuckles and starts telling me about how she's in bad shape too, with high-blood-pressure problems and bunions on both feet. I realize I don't know what a bunion is exactly.

Chris Cross steps into the room and says, "Now that everyone's here, Byron would like us to meet him in the dining room."

Across the foyer, the formal dining room is long and rectangular, with windows on two walls and a fireplace. Beneath a crystal chandelier lies a long table. Against the back wall is another table covered with dishes and serving platters. The room smells wonderfully of heavily spiced food.

Chris Cross directs everyone in. "Sit anywhere," she says. Everyone settles in. I wait and wind up sitting next to Aunt Rose, who sits at the end of the table.

Sam LaCaze points to the empty chair at the head of the table. "I thought you said Byron was joining us."

Chris Cross walks across the room to the double doors beyond the head of the table. She opens them and there's a bedroom behind. My great-uncle Byron Barré, sitting up in a hospital bed with one of those oxygen tubes under his nose, waves her around the bed. Moving behind, she pushes the bed forward until it almost touches the table.

I never realized how much my great-uncle resembles a toad. Bald now, with a set of jowls that would make a bloodhound envious, Uncle Byron drips saliva from his half-open mouth as he looks around at us. Thank God he's no blood relative. I wouldn't want tadpole genes. In green pajamas, which enhances his toad appearance, he raises a pasty-looking hand and says, "Y'all eat."

Sam LaCaze doesn't have to be told twice. He bounces up and heads for the table with the food, pulling the tops off trays, filling his plate. The others file in behind him.

I watch Chris Cross attend to Uncle Byron, dabbing his saliva with a white towel, checking his pulse. He doesn't look at her. He focuses his narrow eyes at the relatives hovering over the food table and watches, his mouth quivering.

Aunt Rose leans over me and says, "I made a blackberry pie." She grins at me and I smile back as I stand. Chris Cross gets in line in front of me and fills a plate for Uncle Byron. I smell her perfume again, even among the strong culinary scents. At one point she steps back and bumps into me, turns and gives me a look that oozes sex. It's there in those wide eyes, waving at me.

A large woman wearing a starched white cook's dress steps into the room next to the food table. Her mahogany face beams as she looks at us piling up our plates. She looks a lot like Hattie McDaniel, from *Gone with the Wind*. I ask Chris who she is.

"That's Tamantha. The cook."

I turn my attention to the food. There's turkey, of course, and cranberry sauce, corn on the cob, and pumpkin pie. There're also the Cajun dishes—shrimp jambalaya, seafood gumbo, and magnificent roast pig we call *Cochon de Lait*.

I pile a little of just about everything on my plate and sit. I notice Tamantha hasn't joined us. She's probably eating in the kitchen. Some things never change down South.

Aunt Rose slides a saucer next to my plate with a slice of her blackberry pie on it. I thank her and dig into the succulent *Cochon de Lait*. My relatives talk in muted tones as we eat.

Chris Cross sits at the far end of the table with her own plate now as Uncle Byron feeds himself. For an old, sick man he has some appetite. Some of the food dribbles on his chest, but he doesn't seem to mind.

Cousin Ty, headphones still on, eats next to me, his fork moving up and down in tune with the drumbeat reverberating in his headphones.

I enjoy mixing the tastes: a bite of turkey, followed by jambalaya, followed by the sharp gumbo is an outrageous mix. Aunt Rose passes me the pitcher of iced tea. Just as I pour some, I notice Chris Cross stand and Uncle Byron waving at us.

"Your uncle has an announcement," Chris says. She moves his plate away and wipes his face with another white cloth. Apparently the old man has eaten enough for now.

He props himself up and clears his throat. "I have something to tell y'all."

Chris Cross moves to the back of his bed, giving him a clear view.

"I just changed my will." He waves his pasty hand at us. "All y'all used to be in my will. 'Cept now. Some 'a y'all are still in it. Some ain't."

And he turns and signals Chris, who pulls the bed back into the bedroom and closes the double doors. I'm the only one still eating. The others look stunned.

"Bastard," someone mumbles.

"Son of a bitch!" This comes from my shy cousin Constance.

Uncle Sabin leans across the table toward me and says, "I like Kennedy."

"Me too." Although I wasn't even born when he was assassinated, my father taught me a lot about Kennedy, and his brother Bobby, too.

Sam LaCaze growls loudly, then says, "Old bastard!"

Aunt Rose raises a hand. "So what if he changed his will. He'll change it again. He's always changing it."

She goes back to eating.

Chris Cross comes back in through the door from the foyer and the only sound now is the clicking of utensils on plates, along with the dull echo of Ty's headphones. She sits and winks at me.

Sam LaCaze growls again. "Someone oughta put a pillow over that old bastard's face and just smother him."

"He'd just eat the pillow," Josh says.

I slice off a piece of Aunt Rose's blackberry pie with my fork and eat it. How she can make it so tangy and sweet at the same time is a minor miracle. She grins at me and I blow her a kiss.

After dinner, everyone moves back into the living room. I stay to help Tamantha pick up.

"You go on," she says, shooing me away.

I thank her for the delicious meal and she gives me one of those no-nonsense nods and shoos me away again, a big smile on her

wide face. Although she's probably in her mid fifties, Tamantha's arms are bigger than mine, so I don't argue.

Cousin Ty, seated in front of the TV, has removed his headphones as he and Sam and Josh and even Uncle Sabin watch a football game.

"At least he's got cable," Josh says.

I settle into the chair in the dark corner where Sabin had been sitting earlier. Aunt Rose sits next to me and tells me about her medical problems again, adding how she's so far-sighted she has problems seeing anything up close without her glasses, only she's too vain to wear them.

Relatives. I love 'em.

It isn't long before I feel sleepy. Aunt Rose's voice is soothing, like a running stream of gurgling water. I fight off a yawn, stretch, and excuse myself.

"I think I'll go for a walk."

Around Cannes Brulé, the swamp is never far. I smell it as soon as I step out on the back porch. The bayous around our village cut through it like veins through the rich flora. I take in a deep breath and it stirs an ancient memory of home. Lush and sweet, the fetid scent of the swamp is so strong. There's no smell like it on Earth.

Crossing the wide backyard to the towering cypress trees dripping Spanish moss at the rear of my uncle's property, I think about my father and the unending summer of my youth. Living on the bayou, like "swamp rats"—as I was called in high school—we lived mostly off the land, fishing and hunting.

Calixte Beau, always tall and thin, with a thick mane of raven-black hair and a droopy moustache, was a man with a kind heart. While my mother, the quiet and determined Sioux, taught me the lessons of the plains, of surviving the losses in life—like my little brother, whose malformed heart allowed him to live only three years—my father showed me the sun and the moonlight glittering on Vermilion Bay and how lucky we are to have one breath on this "beautiful planet," as he called it.

In the afternoon light, I hear the ceaseless drone of insects, the call of cicadas echoing from the swamp. The air is so heavy with humidity it's like standing in a hot rain cloud.

In teaching me how to survive, how to be a man, my father taught me much more about human nature than any college course I took up at LSU. I have his dark complexion and his square jaw and the light Acadian eyes. Inside, however, I'm much more like my mother, the plains warrior. That's what makes me a good cop, I guess. Ever the pursuer, I relish tracking down killers. I truly do.

As I stand at the edge of the marsh that falls away into the deep

swamp, I breathe in the air of my youth and miss my father, miss my young years so much my chest aches.

I hear someone behind me, turn, and Chris Cross walks slowly toward me.

"It's nice out here, even hot like this." She fans herself with a hand. Stopping next to me, she looks at the marsh. "You going back to New Orleans tonight?"

"I plan to. Unless someone stuffs a pillow over the old bastard's face this afternoon."

She gives me a solemn look. "I really think he's in danger."

"Pulling that will switch was like throwing gas on a fire."

She nods. "He likes drama."

Stepping closer, Chris turns her face to the side and leans toward me. I feel my neck craning forward to meet her lips. She closes her eyes and we kiss, softly, very softly.

Pulling back, she blinks her eyes open and says, "Most everyone is staying the weekend. There's plenty of room for you."

Again, a little voice in my head tells me to get back to New Orleans, to escape while I can. But my rising heartbeat tells me something quite different as we kiss again, not so softly this time.

Sitting on the sofa next to me, Chris Cross reaches over and plucks an M&M, peanut style, from one of the candy dishes interspersed around Uncle Byron's living room.

After supper, with my stomach filled again with Tamantha's cooking, I watch some inane sitcom on TV, Aunt Rose on one side and Chris on the other. The others are also gathered around the tube, even Uncle Sabin, back in his dark corner.

Ty, who has commandeered the remote control, switches to HBO just as a movie starts. *Goodfellas*, ha! Exactly what we need—a bloody Mafia murder story. I haven't seen it, and watching De Niro and Pesci and that new guy, Ray Liotta, perks me up. I'm in my element: big-city crime, fast-talking wiseguys, and pretty women. I like it a lot.

Looking around at my relatives, who seem mesmerized by the action, I wonder if one of them will go into the kitchen tonight for a butcher knife. Naw. I'm being melodramatic.

After the movie, I go back into the dining room for one more piece of Aunt Rose's blackberry pie while Chris Cross checks on Uncle Byron. I can't remember the last time I ate so much in one day.

It's Aunt Rose who shows me my room later, upstairs at the rear of the house. I brought a change of clothes just in case. Cannes Bruléé has a neat little hotel called the Come Back Inn, and I thought about spending the night long before Chris Cross slipped me a soft kiss.

The large bedroom has a double bed with a canopy over it and a

walk-in closet nearly as big as the bedroom of my houseboat back on Lake Pontchartrain, at the edge of the big city.

I sit on the bed and pull off my running shoes just as someone knocks softly on my door. I open it and Chris slips in, wrapping her arms around my neck, pressing herself against me.

We kiss standing, then kiss sitting on the bed, then kiss lying on the bed. Coming up for breath, Chris pulls away and tugs her dress back into place.

"Oh," she gasps. "We'd better slow down."

What? I'm in third gear already.

She bounces off the bed, straightens her dress, and turns back and says, "I'm glad you're spending the night." Then she leaves.

Panting as I lie on my bed, I have to laugh. What a flirt!

I lie back and wait for my heartbeat to return to normal. Hell, it's no problem. Not really. Sex is always the woman's call. The kissing was nice, very nice.

Only it's not easy falling asleep later, not easy at all.

After showering the next morning, I walk back down the hall to my room. In my light blue Police Association T-shirt and faded jeans, I'm barefoot. The breeze from the huge window fan at the end of the hall feels nice on my semi-damp skin.

Just as I open the door of my room, I hear rushing feet downstairs and loud voices. I toss my old clothes on the bed and pull on my running shoes. A woman screams loudly downstairs and I hurry down.

I push my way through the relatives gathered outside Uncle Byron's bedroom. Inside the room, Chris Cross hovers over my great-uncle as he lies in his bed. Sam LaCaze stands behind her next to the windows, glowering at her. Aunt Rose, standing in the doorway to the bathroom, has her hands over her mouth.

Ty pushes in behind me and I shove him back out of the room and close the door. Chris looks up at me and shakes her head. She pulls the stethoscope from her ears and lets out a long sigh.

She's in an all-white jumpsuit this morning and her cappuccino lipstick looks fresh. Sam wears a ratty gray T-shirt and jeans. Aunt Rose has another grandmother dress on, this one with little pink flowers. All three stare at me.

I step around to my great-uncle, whose half-open eyes are glazed with the unmistakable look of death. He's cold to my touch and stiff already.

Someone outside the room starts crying.

"Who got here first?" I ask Chris.

She takes in a deep breath. "I came in to check on him."

I point my chin at Sam. "When did he get here?"

"Aunt Rose came in behind me, then him."

"All right." I point at Sam. "You get out." Moving to Aunt Rose, I

take her hand and lead her out into the hall. Sam hasn't moved, so I walk up to him and tell him either he gets out or I throw him out.

"Yeah?" He balls his hands into fists.

I look him in the eye, grab the front of his T-shirt, and pull him across the room.

"Okay, okay!" He goes without resisting. I shove him into the hall.

Cousin Lorraine shoves her face forward and points to the bed. "Sam did it. See the pillow. He smothered him!"

Sam raises a hand and I grab it. I tell them all to calm down and shut up. Then I warn Sam that if he hits anyone, I'll send him to Singing River Hospital in about three seconds.

Chris is on the phone when I step back in.

"Coroner's office?" she says. "This is Dr. Christine Cross calling from Byron Barré's house off Crooked Bayou. . . ."

Leaning against the doorframe of the bathroom, I look around and see the medicine cabinet is open. I flip on the light and step in. The cabinet is filled with prescription bottles. I count an even dozen—Procardia, Acetaminophen (that's Tylenol), Ibuprofen (that's like Advil), several I've never heard of, one that starts with the letter L, two that start with the letter C, and . . .

"Can you come here?" Chris calls out.

She's leaning over the body as I step up behind her. She points to Byron's neck. "No ligature," she says, and I know she means no strangulation mark. She pulls his lips away from his teeth and we both can see there's no sign of suffocation. The small blood vessels in the lips look undamaged.

"We'll see at the autopsy," she says as she stands up.

"You all right?" I ask.

She nods and then shrugs, then hugs me. I gotta admit, she feels pretty good this morning as we stand hugging over my dead great-uncle. I know—shame on me.

"You called it," I say.

She sighs.

"You said he was going to die and he did." I don't add that a good homicide detective doesn't believe in coincidences.

"I said I thought someone was going to murder him. Because he was so nasty and changed his will."

"You knew about the change of will?" I can't see her face, but she seems to tense up.

"Your aunt Rose told me."

"Anybody else know before he announced it?"

She pulls away and looks me in the eye. "His lawyer, obviously. And he's not here." There's an edge to her voice now.

Loud voices echo in the hall and someone knocks hard on the door.

I open it to Sam LaCaze's angry face. "Tell them I didn't suffocate the old bastard. He was dead 'fore I got in there."

They all back up as I step into the hall. I shrug and tell them I have no idea how the old man died. But it looks like a natural death.

"See!" Sam glares at the rest, then shoves his way toward the front of the house.

Movement behind me turns me around just as Tamantha steps up, her face wet with tears. Her mouth shaking, she stammers, "Could it been something he ate?"

"We all ate the same food," Chris Cross answers behind me.

Tamantha grabs my right hand with both hands and squeezes it.

"Lordy," she cries. "I don't believe it."

"Come on," I tell her and lead her back into the kitchen.

"He was on a special diet," Tamantha says between sobs. "The doctor done supervised it. Lordy, I hope it wasn't nothin' he ate."

At the rear of the house, the kitchen has a row of windows facing the backyard. Bright and airy, it smells sweetly of spices. Tamantha sits at the small wooden kitchen table.

"I made sure he got no pie and no coffee," she says.

Aunt Rose steps around me and puts a hand on Tamantha's shoulder. "He's been eating the same foods all his life. It wasn't anything he ate."

Tamantha seems to calm a little.

Stepping backward, I bump into the center-island counter. It's solid and my hip bounces off it. Above the island hangs dried fruit and vegetables, roots and spices.

A commotion in the hall draws me back there. A sheriff's deputy in a khaki uniform steps into Uncle Byron's room, followed by a man in a brown suit. I ease in behind them and watch as Chris Cross and the man in the suit, the coroner's investigator, make a quick examination of the body, pronouncing death, which the deputy duly notes on his clipboard.

Noticing me, the deputy orders me out of the room.

Chris Cross starts to tell them who I am, but I wave and leave. No problem. Down the hall, my relatives stand in the foyer glaring at me. I turn and go back into the kitchen.

Aunt Rose is sitting with Tamantha.

I go to the far counter and pour myself a cup of coffee. I ask, but they don't want any. Standing with my back against the center island, I sip the strong coffee and chicory. The scent of garlic turns me around and I see cloves hanging over the island next to several stalks of sugarcane. I recognize leaves of filé, the Cajun sassafras necessary for any good gumbo. Two sets of blue leaves catch my attention.

One is a bright blue plant with a hairy stem and long, thick roots. Hanging from the ceiling, the plant is about three feet long. The other plant has small pealike blue flowers and roots about

four feet long. The root is soft to the touch and bright yellow. Sticky, it leaves black on my fingers and smells like candy.

"What's this?" I ask.

Aunt Rose looks but says nothing. Tamantha says, "That's blue azucar. It's like a beet."

I point to the other blue plant and she tells me it's chicory. "I make my own coffee and chicory. 'Course, I use decaffeinated beans for Uncle Byron and no chicory."

Another commotion in the hall pulls me there as the body is rolled out on a gurney. I follow it outside where an EMT van waits, along with Chris Cross, the coroner's investigator, and another man in a khaki uniform. Chris introduces me to Sheriff Joe Urquhart, a portly man in his sixties with a white moustache and matching short-cropped hair.

"So the doctor here tells me you're a homicide detective. NOPD."

I nod as I shake his strong hand.

"Not mucha that round here," the sheriff says.

"Good."

Chris turns to the coroner's investigator and says, "Are you sure about the autopsy?"

The investigator nods and says that if the attending doctor requests one, it's no problem. "You want one. You got one. First thing in the morning." He and the sheriff walk off behind the body.

No one has to explain it to me. Usually, when a patient dies under a doctor's care and there's no suspicion of foul play, no marks on the body, an autopsy isn't necessary. Chris must have her reasons. Either she wants to cover her ass so no one can say she killed her patient, or she just wants to know what it was, exactly, that ended the long, nasty life of my great-uncle.

As the vehicles slowly back out, someone screams in the house.

Lorraine runs out of Uncle Byron's bedroom toward us and shouts, "Sam found the new will!"

With Chris right behind, I elbow my way into the bedroom. Sam stands next to the window with legal-sized papers in his hands.

He reads loudly, "... and to Constance Smith, I bequeath the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

Constance waivers as she stands, bracing herself against a chifforobe.

"And to Rose Degas, I bequeath the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

Aunt Rose sits on the bed.

Sam continues reading. Ty gets a hundred grand. Sabin gets the same as Rose. Lorraine gets the same as Constance.

Sam gives me a hateful stare and continues. "And to John Raven Beau, I bequeath the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

It registers, but I do my best not to react.

"And to Dr. Christine Cross, I bequeath the sum of three hundred thousand dollars." An audible "Oh" follows that statement.

Chris grabs my hand from behind and squeezes.

"And to Tamantha Combs, I bequeath the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars and my home and all movable and immovable property therein."

And even louder "Oh" echoes, interrupted by Aunt Rose. "Now Tamantha can gather her children and grandchildren and live in style."

Sam glares at her. He reads on, mentioning people not present, people who get less money. Then he reaches the end, looks up, and says, "See. I get nothin'!"

He rips the will in an angry rage and throws it in the air.

Lorraine screams. Ty yells angrily. Constance screams. They all look at me as Sam storms out. I grin at them and tell them Byron's lawyer has to have the original will in his office, or it's already filed in probate court.

Josh looks at me with tears in his eyes. He's not mentioned either.

Sam yells in the hallway, calling Chris a whore. When he calls Aunt Rose a whore, I move into the hall and grab him by the throat. My right fist balled in front of his ugly face, I tell him to shut up.

"One more word and I'll break you in half, old man."

He grabs my hand and tries to pull it away. I squeeze until his face is nice and red, then let go. He stumbles away and out the front door.

Back in the bedroom, everyone looks dazed. "Come on," I tell them as I urge them out. "Why don't we help Tamantha fix some breakfast?"

Chris sits on the bed, her legs crossed.

The others move into the hall toward the kitchen.

Chris looks at me and says, "Will you come with me into town to make the funeral arrangements later?"

I tell her sure as I step into the bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I move over to the toilet. As I unzip my jeans, I look at the medicine cabinet. There are eleven pill bottles now.

On the way to the funeral home, I ask Chris if the coroner's investigator took any medication out of Byron's medicine cabinet.

"No. He looked at them, but didn't take anything. I watched him."

"Well, a bottle's missing." I tell her there were twelve, now there are eleven.

"When I get back, I'll look," she says as she tools the BMW across Crooked Bayou toward Cannes Brulé.

I don't tell her the medicine that started with an L is missing. I

also noticed, looking carefully at the scripts, that all had come from Evangel's Pharmacy, the oldest drugstore in Cannes Bruleé.

She's a little frosty now, behind those dark sunglasses. I pretend not to notice. I'm in my white dress shirt again; I wear it out to hide my Beretta. No way I'm leaving my gun in my room. Not with those relatives.

As we enter the village, I look around at the familiar cottages and small businesses along Highway 82, which is called Landrieu Avenue as it passes through town. The red brick courthouse, with its spires and parapets, still looks like a medieval castle.

We pass my old high school, Holy Ghost. A large white sign with red and blue lettering announces, "Go Riders!" The white masonry buildings look the same, except the oaks out front are older and wider.

The BMW turns into the front parking lot of Marais' Funeral Parlor. Climbing out, I look across Landrieu Avenue at the long row of wooden buildings that house the central business district of Cannes Bruleé, such as it is. Along the row is Evangel's Pharmacy.

In the funeral home, when Chris sits down to fill out paperwork, I slip away. Stepping outside, I see the same coroner's investigator getting into his car. I call over and ask him about the medicines. No, he didn't take anything. Yes, he looked at the medicine cabinet. He describes the pills as "nothing exotic."

I cross over to Evangel's and go inside. The drugstore smells of wintergreen and baby powder. I move to the back where a skinny bald man in a white lab coat smiles at me from behind the pharmacy counter.

"Excuse me," I start. "I need some help."

I introduce myself and he tells me his name is Erich Weiss. He looks to be in his sixties.

"I just came from the funeral home." I point over my shoulder. "My great-uncle, Byron Barré, just passed away."

He is shaken for a moment, then recovers. "He was orn'ry. But I hate to see him go. Every town needs an angry old man, just to keep things interesting."

I take out my ID folder with my gold star-and-crescent detective's badge clipped outside, open it, and show it to Weiss. He pulls a pair of black-rimmed glasses out of his coat pocket and looks at my credentials. He's puzzled.

"Is there any way you can let me see my uncle's prescription list?"

The old man pulls off his glasses and stares at me. I slip my badge and folder back into my back pocket.

"What happened to you at LSU?"

I don't expect that.

"I remember your senior season at Holy Ghost. You were one heck of a quarterback."

"Tore my knee up in a scrimmage. Tiger Stadium. Sophomore year."

The old man puts his hands on the counter and leans toward me. "I remember your father. A most likable man. And your mother, very quiet. Sioux, wasn't she?"

"Oglala Sioux. She's back in South Dakota with her family."

He nods slowly, and I wait.

"Didn't realize you were related to Byron."

"We're the dark sheep of the family."

A slight smile comes to the man's face. He raises a hand and goes into the back room. Coming out with a box full of index cards, he has his glasses back on.

"There's nothing suspicious here." He starts passing me the index cards. I pull the small notebook from my back pocket and start listing the scripts.

"No sleeping pills," Weiss says. "Nothing extraordinary." He passes me more cards as he keeps fishing them out of the box. "Vitamins. Prescription-strength Tylenol."

I hold three off to the side. When Weiss is finished, I ask him about them.

"Procardia," he explains, "is used for angina, spasms of the esophagus, hypertension. That's high blood pressure."

I pass him the second card.

"Calan also prevents angina attacks, stabilizes irregular heart-beat, and treats hypertension."

I save the one with the drug that starts with an L for last.

"Lozide. Controls high blood pressure also." He holds up the cards and adds, "All of these were taken at different times, if you check the dates."

"Which is the newest?"

"Lozide. Prescribed by Dr. C. Cross just last week."

I reach my hand out and he shakes it.

"Thanks," I say. "If Uncle Byron took an overdose of any of these, would it show up at the autopsy?"

"Certainly. If they look for it."

"I'll let 'em know." I start to leave, then turn back. "Can I get slips on those medications. You know, those long slips with the tiny print that come with them?"

It takes Weiss a couple minutes, but he finds directions sheets for each. I thank him again and leave.

Chris Cross is standing not fifty feet away, outside the men's clothing store next to Evangel's. She jumps when I tap her on the shoulder.

"I thought you came over here for some clothes."

"Not a bad idea." I open the door to the clothes store and she walks in, a puzzled look on her face.

She doesn't say a word on the trip back to my great-uncle's house. Frosty before, she's downright icy now.

Tamantha and Aunt Rose are serving a late lunch by the time we get back. I slip upstairs, find a phone, and call the coroner's office. Yes, I tell the answering service, it's an emergency.

She patches me through to the coroner himself. Dr. Reginald Jones sounds like Big Daddy from that Tennessee Williams play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

It takes a while, but I convince him to write down the information and he promises to have his pathologist check. Hanging up, I'm not sure I believe him, but what else can I do?

On my way downstairs, I run into Uncle Sabin. He grabs my arm and whispers in my ear, "I been watching Sam. He's acting guilty. I think he smothered Byron."

I pat him on the shoulder and try my best not to sound patronizing. "Byron wasn't smothered."

"You're sure about that?"

"Come on," I tell him. "Let's eat."

Lunch among the family, with Chris Cross sitting away from everyone at the head of the table, is tension-filled and punctuated by dagger looks. I dig in to the leftover *Cochon de Lait* and jambalaya.

After checking in on Samantha, who's sitting with Aunt Rose in the kitchen, I head upstairs to check out the medication directions sheets in my room. It takes awhile, with the tiny print and all, but I find something that causes my heartbeat to rise.

Tamantha stands next to the kitchen's center island. Chopping green onions, she moves so slowly, she looks like she's in a trance. I clear my throat and she turns her brown eyes my way.

"Is there any licorice in those candy dishes out there?" I point back toward the living room.

"Licorice?" Samantha squints at me. "Licorice, you say?" She shakes her head as if to clear it.

"No licorice," she says. "I don't know anyone who likes that. I got chocolate for the company."

My nose itches from the strong scents of the spices. Samantha finishes with the onions, moves the colander aside, and pulls down a chicory plant. Switching knives, she starts dicing up the root.

"My mother always bought coffee with chicory in it."

Tamantha finishes dicing the root and reaches for an old-fashioned blender to mince the root into a fine powder. "I always use fresh chicory." Pointing her chin at the other blue plant, she adds, "Dr. Chris, she likes that blue azucar. Sweeten things, like gumbo and jambalaya. Gets rid of the bitter."

Turning, I pull the plant closer and give it a sniff. It smells like a cough lozenge.

"Did Dr. Chris bring this?" She'd called herself an amateur chef, back at the Red Wolf Cafe.

Tamantha narrows her eyes as if she's thinking. "I'm not sure. She and Rose bring in stuff all the time. Rose uses it too. It's common."

Picking up a knife, I slice off a piece of the yellow root. It's rubbery and black inside. I press it to my tongue. Sweet, it has a strong aftertaste. I roll my tongue against my teeth and it hits me. Licorice!

I use the phone in the upstairs hall to call Erich Weiss at the pharmacy.

"Azucar?" he says. "It's native to south Louisiana and other places too. I don't know much about it. But the lady two doors down, at the health-food store, probably knows more."

He gives me a name and phone number.

The lady at the health-food store sounds young.

"Oh," she says, "you mean Spanish licorice, don't you?"

I describe the plant.

"That's it," she says. "'Azucar' means sugar in Spanish. The proper name is Spanish licorice." She goes on to tell me it's used in candies and as a flavoring agent, how it's native to the Mediterranean, California, and Louisiana. I get off the phone as soon as I can and call the coroner's office right away.

We eat together again that evening, everyone except Chris Cross. Tamantha says she's eating in her room upstairs. Another feast is served—crawfish étouffée, dirty rice, more blackberry pie, along with leftover turkey.

Aunt Rose mentions that the wake will start tomorrow evening.

Every time I look his way, Sam LaCaze glares at me.

Lorraine and Constance seem numb.

Josh barely eats.

Ty has his headphones on again.

And Uncle Sabin is the only one smiling. In his own little world, he's smarter than any of us.

I insist on helping Tamantha and Aunt Rose pick up after. Waiting until we're in the kitchen, I ask my aunt, "Did you bring in this blue azucar?"

"Huh?"

I reach for the Spanish licorice. Rose backs up a step and looks at it and shrugs. "I bring all sorts of spices in. So does Dr. Chris. You know, she's a chef."

Stepping away, I ask, "Don't you take medication for high blood pressure?"

"I certainly do."

"Dr. Chris prescribe it?"

"No. I have my own doctor."

Without further prodding, she steps over to her purse and digs out a prescription bottle, which she hands to me. As she moves back to the sink to help Tamantha, I look at the bottle and feel a sourness in my belly. I slip the bottle back in the purse, next to the glasses Rose should have put on before she dug into her purse.

Ty controls the remote again and flips channels for a good forty minutes before settling on a Hercule Poirot mystery. I sit at the back of the room and watch my distant relatives watch the portly Belgian detective solve the murder mystery on the Orient Express. They all did it.

I almost knock on Chris's door before turning in, but pass by her room and get ready for bed. I'm still awake when I hear a scratching against my door, like a cat. As I climb out of bed, the scratching turns into a light knock.

I open the door to her. She's in a white nightgown, a bottle of red wine in one hand, two glasses in the other. Her eyes widen as she looks at me. She purses her cappuccino lips and I let her in.

"I thought a little Burgundy would be nice."

"Not for me." I sit on the end of my bed.

Standing awkwardly in front of me, she looks around, then puts the wine and glasses on the dresser. Moving back, she stands in front of me, her feet parted, her hands on her hips. I wait.

She leans forward and twists her head to the side, her lips parting, hair falling against the sides of my face. We kiss softly. I close my eyes and lean back on my hands as she presses her weight against me.

Slowly, I sink back on the bed and she's atop me. The kiss continues and it's very nice. When I reach around her, she pushes my hands away.

"No hands," she whispers breathlessly and kisses me again.

When I feel a tear fall on my face, I open my eyes.

She rolls to my left and we lie there on the bed. She wipes the tears from her eyes.

"They hate me," she says. "They think it's my fault he died."

"They're not capable of thinking. . . ."

"You think I killed him, don't you?"

My lips curl into a cold smile. I can't help it.

She gets up and leaves in a hurry.

It takes a long time to fall asleep after I lock my door and slip my Beretta under my pillow.

Looks like I was missed.

Almost everyone is out on the front porch as I park my bike. All

watch me walk up. Sam LaCaze steps in front of me as I reach the porch steps.

Aunt Rose asks me, "Where did you go?"

"Autopsy," I say as I walk around Sam.

There's a collective gasp.

"Anyone interested, I'll be in the living room."

As I wait in the living room, I feel the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. I've never played Hercule Poirot before. This oughta be interesting.

They come in. Sam, then Ty, then Lorraine and Constance, Josh, Aunt Rose, and Tamantha. Chris' Cross, wearing a demure black dress, her face devoid of makeup, sits in the chair nearest the door. Uncle Sabin is last, wringing his hands as he comes in. I've never seen him so excited.

"I like parlor games," Sabin says as he takes a seat next to Ty.

Sam folds his arms. "Okay, Mr. Big-Shot Detective. Start."

"There was a problem at the autopsy," I say.

Chris's face tightens. Sam glowers at me. Watching their reactions isn't as easy as it is in the movies. There're too many of them. So I pace and time my remarks.

"First, we all know how nasty Byron was and how he hated everyone."

"So?" Ty says.

I raise my hand. "We know he changed his will. Only, some of you knew ahead of time that he changed it."

Their voices explode, accusing each other of knowing first. By the time I get them settled, it seems everyone except me knew the old bastard had changed his will.

"Any of you admit knowing what was in that will before Sam read it aloud?" That shuts them up. "In any event, we know he changed his will regularly. Just as he changed his doctors." I watch Chris, who does not react.

Moving between her and the door, I pull my notes from the autopsy from my back pocket. "The cause of death is undetermined. A toxicology report is forthcoming. They're looking for poisoning from an MAO inhibitor and licorice."

Chris leans back in her chair, a shocked look on her face. She's either an excellent actor or I've surprised her.

"What does that mean?" Sam asks.

I pull a medication directions slip from my other back pocket. "It means Uncle Byron ate food with licorice in it while he was taking Lozide for his high blood pressure."

Tamantha lets out a high-pitched cry. Aunt Rose wraps an arm around her. I watch them and Chris as I raise the slip.

"It says here that taking Lozide with licorice can cause dangerous heart rhythms, even death."

Sam stands and points at Chris. "She gave him his medicine!"

Lorraine and Constance add a vocal yes to Sam's statement.

Standing closer to Chris, I continue. "Our doctor, who's an amateur chef, knows all this, just as she knows what a Spanish licorice plant looks like. Don't you?"

She looks up at me with tear-filled eyes.

"Tamantha," I call out as I stare back at Chris. "Didn't you tell me Dr. Chris likes blue azucar very much, that it sweetens things, like gumbo and jambalaya, that it gets rid of the bitter?"

Tamantha lets out another cry behind me.

"Blue azucar is better known as Spanish licorice."

Chris reacts as if I just slapped her face. She slumps in the chair. Tears roll off her face and fall to her lap. She shakes her head, her lips trembling now. I take a step aside, so I can see Aunt Rose as I play my trump. I reach my hand out to Chris.

"The sheriff will be here in a minute. Come on. We'll wait on the porch."

She buries her face in her hands.

Sam takes a step toward us and I point at him. "I don't need any help. Y'all get out."

Lorraine and Constance light out as if they're on fire. Ty leads out Uncle Sabin, whose face shows he has no clue as to what's going on. Sam follows with Josh. Aunt Rose walks Tamantha to the door, lets go, and closes the door behind Tamantha before turning back to me.

Aunt Rose takes in a deep breath and says, "She didn't know blue azucar is Spanish licorice."

I shake my head, reach over, and lay a gentle hand on Chris's shoulder. "No," I say. "She didn't. But you did."

Aunt Rose nods.

I step over to her purse, reach in, and pull out her bottle of Lozide. Then I pull out her glasses.

"You should have put these on," I tell her, "before you reached into your purse yesterday and pulled this out." I reach back in and pull out Byron Barré's bottle of Lozide, the one missing from his bathroom.

"This is the bottle you showed me yesterday."

Aunt Rose's eyes widen and she smiles, realizing her mistake.

Chris, wiping the tears from her face, looks at me, then at Rose, then back at me.

"You know all about MAO inhibitors, don't you, my sweet aunt?"

Aunt Rose nods firmly.

"And you brought in the licorice plant, didn't you?"

She smiles as she keeps nodding.

Chris stands suddenly and asks me, "Then what was all that with me?"

I look at her red-rimmed green eyes. "I had to prove you didn't know. Sorry. Really."

She puts a fist on her hip and points to the door. "They all think I murdered him."

"So? You'll leave here a rich woman and they'll tell their grandchildren about the young, sexy doctor who killed their nasty old uncle. Aunt Rose's secret goes with us."

Chris folds her arms across her chest. "And what about the sheriff?"

"He wasn't at the autopsy. The toxicology report might conclude Byron died of a reaction to an MAO inhibitor and licorice, but I forgot to tell you the coroner's conclusion as to the manner of death."

"What?"

"The cause of death is undetermined. The manner of death is accidental. Only you and I and my aunt know it was done on purpose."

I move up to Chris and stare into her eyes. "You breathe a word and you can kiss that inheritance goodbye. Get my drift?"

I look at Aunt Rose, who gives me an innocent-eyed look. "And as for you. Don't ever do anything like this again, understand?"

She gives me a contrite look, like a puppy who's just been scolded.

Chris opens her hands. "And that's it? It's all over?"

"He was a nasty old man," I say. "He's been dying for years. This is just the exclamation point at the end of a long, hateful life."

Chris looks confused.

"You think I'm going to turn in my little old aunt?"

I lean forward and kiss Chris's lips. I kiss her again and she kisses me back softly.

"So," I tell her. "Let's pack up and blow this joint. Head on back to the big city. Wait for Byron's lawyer to call. We have money to spend, doctor."

Aunt Rose beams as she stands there.

"Wait," Chris says as she reaches for her purse and pulls out a compact and lipstick. I watch her turn her lips into cappuccino.

The door opens and Uncle Sabin peeks in. He clears his throat and says, "Does this mean Sam didn't smother Byron?"

"Yes."

"Damn! I would have liked to see you put the cuffs on that stinker." ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine*, and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at <http://www.mysterypages.com>.

THE SCENT OF POISON

by Donald Olson

On that summer afternoon when Charlie Marks walked into the hotel bar, the hangout where we'd spent so many distant happy hours talking about our plans and our dreams and all those things best friends talk about, I was struck by the change in his appearance, a change that the passage of six years could not solely account for.

"Great to see you, old buddy, how've you been?" I greeted him with an exuberance that sought to conceal my shock. The blond hair was thinner, the set of the shoulders less firm, the blue eyes not quite so cloudless; but it was the pale and wasted look of his face that made me wonder if he'd been battling some illness which had taken a visible and alarming toll.

"Pretty well," he said, sliding into the booth. "Pretty well, all things considered."

"And how is Laura? Well, I hope." Charlie's wife had always been delicate and the loss of their only child had left her with a nervous disability which had appeared, at first, irreversible. Perhaps some new concern about her might account for Charlie's abject appearance. "You said in your last letter that the new house had done wonders for her spirits."

"It did. It proved to be the best medicine in the world. She's been doing great . . . although we're not there anymore. In the house, I mean."

Money troubles? Was that the explanation? I knew that building the new house must have created a financial strain. As a draftsman in an architectural firm, Charlie was well paid but would never be rich. "What happened?" I asked him as soon as our drinks arrived. "I thought you were both delighted with the house. Why move?"

His manner betrayed a certain hesitancy. "Under the circum-

Once again veteran Donald Olson creates an atmosphere of gentility and civilized distance from the act of murder by interposing a narrator at third-hand, someone who joins the scene long after the murders have occurred. We imagine the author seated comfortably beside a teapot as he spins these marvelous tales. ¶

stances, it seemed a wise decision. We're still on Winding Way. Next door, in fact. Much bigger house."

"I shouldn't have thought you'd need anything bigger."

Charlie glanced around; the nearest person was at the bar several feet away. "Listen, there's something I want to tell you. It's got so bad I'll explode if I don't get it off my chest. You're the only one I dare tell. I know I can trust you."

"So what's the problem?"

"You might say I've been haunted," he replied with a humorless twist of the lip, then added quickly, as if remembering my dislike of whimsy: "No, it's not a ghost story I want to tell you. Not exactly." Though "ghost-ridden" would certainly describe his appearance.

He went on to say that it wasn't the house itself so much as the garden that had worked such a miracle on Laura. "She always did love flowers, but until we bought the property in the Royal Oaks subdivision we'd never had room for a real garden. Creating one did more for Laura than all those months of therapy. She was almost like her old self. Happy again, as she hadn't been since Melinda died. Her flower garden became almost an obsession with her, but a healthy one." He showed me his hands, palms up. "I did all the spadework. I've got the calluses to prove it."

The brief smile vanished as he took a long sip of his drink.

"So what happened?" I prompted him.

"I was digging a bed for the Japanese iris. That's when I discovered the body."

My expression seemed genuinely to amuse him. "I'm not kidding. When my spade first uncovered it, I had no idea what it was. Something long and bulky wrapped in heavy green plastic. I got down on my knees and started to unfold a corner of it. The dead face of a woman looked up at me. You can imagine my horror."

"Good God, yes."

"Luckily, Laura was in town at the dentist's when I made the discovery. Just an hour earlier she'd been sitting out there watching me work."

This had happened, he said, almost two years ago.

"What did the police make of it?" I asked.

He looked at me as if I'd uttered the most inane of non sequiturs. "Police? Good heavens, I didn't tell the police. I didn't tell anyone."

"Why not, for God's sake? A body buried in your garden and you didn't tell the police?"

He looked momentarily at a loss, as if he'd assumed I would understand. "The only thought in my head was of how it might affect Laura. She was doing wonderfully, but her state of mind was still precarious. Can't you see what it would have done to her? It would have spoiled everything. A body, obviously a murder victim, buried right there among the flowers. Police tramping

around. Reporters besieging us. People gawking at the house. No way was I going to risk Laura having another breakdown, maybe a permanent setback."

I was too stunned by all this to order my thoughts properly. "So what *did* you do?"

Not sheepishly but with a defiant air of self-justification, he said: "What I didn't do was simply to cover it up again. I couldn't have left it there. Not only for Laura's sake but for my own. The very atmosphere of the garden seemed polluted. Instead of the fragrance of roses and lilies and sweet williams, I imagined already a smell of decay, a scent of poison. All I wanted to do was to remove that horror from Laura's beautiful garden. So that's what I did. I dug the thing up and loaded it in the station wagon and drove out into the country, to a patch of woods where I buried it."

I stared at him in dismay. "My God, Charlie, I don't know what to say."

The bar was rapidly filling up. Charlie looked around. "Don't say anything. Not now. I don't want to talk about it here."

"You mean there's more to tell?"

"Lots more. I haven't begun to tell you the worst part."

Charlie invited me to dinner that evening at the house in Wind-ing Way and after a brief return to my room in the hotel I went out and wandered about the streets of the town where I'd grown up, looking at everything yet seeing nothing, for my mind was wholly absorbed in reflecting upon Charlie's extraordinary confession. I knew how he felt about his wife, the depth of his concern, but such a dangerous impulse to act upon! Unwise, to say the least.

The last time I'd been home, the site of the Royal Oaks subdivision had been a tract of woods and farmland north of the city. Much of it was still undeveloped. The houses, moderately expensive and nicely landscaped, were widely separated and set among oak and evergreen trees.

I recognized the smallish ranch-style house Charlie had built for his wife; he'd sent me a snapshot of it shortly after they'd moved in. I saw no sign of life as I drove slowly by, down the gentle grade among the trees to the adjoining property, which at first I couldn't believe was Charlie's present house. It was far more imposing than its neighbors, what we used to call "modified Gone-with-the-Wind," a two-storyed brick and clapboard structure with a pillared front porch. I wondered how Charlie could possibly have afforded it.

Both Charlie and Laura greeted me at the door. Laura was a willowy, fragile-looking blonde with light gray-blue eyes and long delicate features, thin almost to anorexia. Her welcoming smile betrayed not even a shadow of evidence that she had survived a lengthy struggle against a debilitating illness of the spirit.

"It's been too long," she exclaimed, taking my hand in both of hers.

Much too long, I agreed, and after the usual exchange between good friends long separated by time and distance, and after a couple of drinks to celebrate our reunion, we went in to dinner. I had already admired the house, which was as lovely inside as out, but Laura clearly was more excited about the garden.

"I can't wait to show you," she said. "It's given me a lot more scope to indulge my passion for flowers."

"If it continues, I'll be driven into bankruptcy by nurseries and seed catalogues," said Charlie with a wide smile which didn't altogether mask the underlying strain.

"Did Charlie tell you what a stroke of luck we had? About the house, I mean. It was the first one built by the developers. Some people named McGantry owned it. They'd split up before we built. He lived here by himself and it got to be too much for him. He'd been in a bad car accident with all sorts of complications before his wife left him. I've only met him once or twice but he and Charlie became quite friendly. McGantry wanted a smaller place on one floor. He and Charlie made a fantastic deal to swap houses, much to our advantage."

Charlie made a face. "Long as we can afford to pay the taxes."

Laura was eager to show me her garden before dusk set in, and afterward, because she still tired easily and went early to bed, Charlie and I were left alone on the terrace with our brandy and cigarettes. Plainly, his performance at dinner had been a strain, for now he subsided into a mood of despair.

"Poor Laura," he mused. "If only she knew what a price I paid for this house. Not in money but in peace of mind."

"So tell me about it," I replied, and as the dusk faded into night and the moon came up over the trees in the garden, he told me the rest of the story in a voice as desolate as the silence around us.

Charlie had tried to wipe from his mind the experience of unearthing that body and burying it miles away in the woods. He prayed that in time the memory would recede like a bad dream, and so it might have done had he not made the acquaintance of his neighbor, McGantry. Their two properties were separated by a wooded area of spruce and oak trees, and he'd met McGantry by chance one evening as Charlie had been walking the Labrador he'd bought for Laura to keep her company while he was at work.

McGantry also had a dog. The Labrador spotted the beagle and chased it, barking excitedly, halfway up the drive. McGantry came out of the house. He was holding a beer can in one hand and leaned heavily upon a cane with the other. As they fell into conversation, Charlie soon realized that his neighbor was more than a little drunk. He was a big man who gave the impression of having lost whatever vigor he'd once possessed. His face was deeply

scored and under shaggy brows his eyes were bloodshot.

"Didn't suppose I'd ever have any neighbors," McGantry remarked as the two dogs examined each other with amiable curiosity. "Original developer went bust after this house was built. Didn't make me unhappy. I'm not the neighborly sort." Which his next words seemed to belie. "Come in for a beer?"

Charlie declined with thanks. "My wife's not been well and I don't like to leave her alone after dark. Can I have a raincheck?"

"Any time. I'm always here. Don't navigate too well after this." He gave his leg a thump with the cane. "Don't drive anymore, so no car."

"Well, give me a shout if you ever need a lift," Charlie urged.

"Thanks, I'll do that."

But he never did, and it was several weeks before Charlie saw him again, under identical circumstances. This time he accepted McGantry's invitation to have a drink. McGantry had obviously already had several, and as he handed a beer to Charlie his hand trembled. Despite the room's costly furnishings, McGantry was no housekeeper. The absence of a woman's touch was all too obvious. It was also clear that McGantry was not a well man.

"Don't ever get sick," he said leadenly as he slumped on a sofa pockmarked with cigarette burns, "unless your wife really meant it when she said 'in sickness and in health.' Mine didn't. I was no good to the bitch after the accident. That was bad enough. Hell of it was I needed several transfusions and got some bad blood in my veins, if you know what I mean. Not just junkies get the curse, you know."

Charlie was appalled and hardly knew what to say. He felt, too, the embarrassment one feels when a virtual stranger, tongue loosened by alcohol, says things he might later regret.

"Shot off into the wild blue yonder first chance she got," growled McGantry. "Hell, I guess I couldn't blame her. She was a looker and not cut out to nurse the sick."

He struggled to his feet and crossed to the fireplace, picked up a photograph in a silver frame, stared at it moodily for a moment, and then handed it to Charlie. "That's her. That's sweet Sue."

The shock of recognition hit Charlie like a jolt of electricity. There was no possibility of doubt. It was the face of the woman whose body he'd unearthed in the garden.

"I couldn't bear it," said Charlie, draining his glass. "It was like I'd lost the power of speech. All I wanted was to get out of there."

"You're absolutely certain it was the same woman?" I asked him.

"Of course I'm certain."

"What are you suggesting? That McGantry murdered his wife and buried her in your garden?"

"Only it wasn't my garden then. It was just woodland. And McGantry made it plain he'd never expected the lot to be built on.

Never expected another developer to take over the project."

"But you say he's a cripple. How could he—"

"Not that crippled. He's got great strength in his arms and shoulders, and he wasn't so ill then. He could have done it."

The deep silence in the garden and surrounding woods, as well as the subject we were discussing, seemed to require we speak almost in whispers, like conspirators planning a crime instead of recalling one already committed.

"You learned all this when? Two years ago? And still did nothing?"

"What could I have done without endangering Laura's health? It would have been even riskier then to inform the police. By then I'd moved the body. Is that a felony? I don't know. It would have surely landed me in the soup."

"So nothing's happened since then?" I asked him.

"I didn't say that. I knew I wanted nothing more to do with McGantry. I took care to avoid him. It's strange, but for a while I felt a kind of relief. The dead woman was no longer a mystery. I knew who she was and why she'd died. I even began to sympathize with McGantry and the reason he'd been driven to do what he did. It was a horrible thing but there were mitigating circumstances, I told myself. Life went on. Laura was happier than she'd ever been and that made me happy. Evil had been done, but it no longer polluted Laura's beautiful garden. It had nothing to do with us."

The air was faintly humid but rich with the odor of peonies and roses, colorless in the moonlight but not masking evidence of murder, which in Charlie's tortured mind had turned that other garden into a graveyard. "I take it something must have happened to destroy that happiness," I said, and waited patiently for him to reply; he seemed to have become lost in some private reverie. Presently, however, he resumed his story.

Charlie no longer walked the dog past McGantry's house and felt sure McGantry himself would make no further overtures of friendship. He was wrong. There came a Saturday morning when Laura called him to the phone while he was doing some yard work. It was McGantry, wanting to know if by chance Charlie might be going into town; if so, he would appreciate a lift to the drugstore, as he had a prescription to renew. Charlie felt that he could hardly refuse inasmuch as he himself had offered his services.

They didn't talk much until McGantry had finished his errands and suggested they stop off at a bar he knew for a couple of drinks. Getting in and out of the car seemed to have exhausted him.

In the bar, he ordered a whisky. It seemed to revive him. They took a table by the window and chatted about nothing of consequence until suddenly he said, "This is where they used to meet."

"They?" Charlie asked, for the man's tone had been bitter.

"Sweet Sue and her boyfriend. A stud. Real he-man. More *he* than I was able to be any longer. I found out about it by accident but kept my mouth shut. I could still drive, and I used to follow them. They always met here and then drove to a motel outside of town. Man, it really tore me up. I loved her, you know. I guess I put up with it and kept quiet hoping it was just a fling, that she wouldn't actually run out on me."

Charlie didn't want to listen to any of this, wanted only to get McGantry home and make a point never to see him again. For the moment, he had no choice but to let the man ramble on.

"I had a doctor's appointment one morning. I remember she asked me how long I'd be gone. As it happened, the doctor had been called away on an emergency so I turned around and went back home. I walked in on them, Sue and her boyfriend. She was all packed; they were ready to take off. We had a hell of a row, but there was nothing I could do to stop her."

"So they went off together?"

"Yeah. Lovebirds in flight."

"In his car?"

McGantry gave Charlie a funny look. "He didn't have a car. Hell, I don't think he had a damn thing except what she wanted—what I could no longer give her. They went in her car. I reminded her the car was my property. She said they'd leave it at the bus station in town. I found it there that night."

McGantry said it was the last he'd ever heard of them. No one had inquired about them. Sue had no family—she and McGantry were virtual newcomers in town—and the guy was a drifter.

Charlie couldn't sit there another minute listening to McGantry's lies. He told him he had to get home. McGantry said no more until they reached his place. Then, as he was about to get out of the car, he looked at Charlie with a big, gloating smile on his face. "One thing I'm sure of, pal. They're still together. Don't ask me how I know, but take my word for it, wherever they've gone to ground they're stuck with each other."

McGantry's choice of words didn't really hit Charlie until he got home. Then he felt sick. *Wherever they've gone to ground they're stuck with each other.*

It could mean only one thing. Charlie got out of the car and looked over at the bed of purple iris covering the spot where he'd found the body. And he thought, My God, *he's* there, too. Sue McGantry's lover. Probably only inches from where McGantry had buried his wife.

The rest of Charlie's story was soon told. His one abiding concern had been to spare Laura the knowledge of the secret he was hiding. At the same time, he knew he couldn't continue to live on that property. The poison was still there, once more infecting his spirit.

Yet he could think of no reason to sell the house that would seem logical to Laura. Finally, he came to a decision and on a casual pretext paid McGantry a visit. He told him that they'd decided the house was not really spacious enough for them. They were planning to dig up the whole backyard and build an addition. Charlie said that the look on McGantry's face removed whatever slim doubt remained in his mind as to McGantry's guilt.

"Of course," he told McGantry, "that means Laura won't have nearly enough space for the sort of garden she wanted."

They were standing alongside McGantry's driveway. "Pity you're not interested in gardening," Charlie added with an innocent smile. "Just think of the flower beds Laura could plant on this much land."

At first McGantry didn't respond, as if it took awhile for Charlie's message to penetrate his mind. Then a slow smile spread across his face. "Funny you should say that, Charlie. Lately I've been thinking I'm in no shape to keep up this big a place. A one-floor ranch like yours would suit me better. Maybe we could do each other a favor."

With a pretense of surprise Charlie said: "Swap houses, you mean?"

"Why not?"

Charlie laughed. "This place is worth three times as much as ours. I could never afford a swap. No, I guess our best choice is to go ahead with the excavation."

"Money doesn't mean a darn thing to me," McGantry said. "Hell, my days are numbered. Let's make it an even exchange. Talk it over with your wife. I'm sure she'll go for it."

One visit to the McGantry place and Laura was sold on the idea. In her mind she could already picture a flower garden with infinite possibilities.

I was out of the country for several months after that, and when I returned home I found a letter waiting for me from Charlie. In it he told me that McGantry was dead. Several weeks after my visit, a hunter had come upon Susan McGantry's body where Charlie had buried it—evidently not deep enough. Forensic evidence pointed to McGantry as her murderer, but before he could be charged he killed himself with a single bullet to the head.

Charlie ended his letter on a bitter note of self-reproach: "I suppose you might say a kind of poetic justice has been served, which doesn't make me feel any better, since I feel responsible for the poor wretch's death. If it weren't for Laura, I couldn't bear to stay in this house. It's a constant reminder of him. My nerves are so bad I've begun taking medication for depression. All I seem to do is brood. I sometimes feel that Laura is losing patience with me. At least she has her garden and a friend she met at a flower show. She spends a lot of time with him. I don't mind. Whatever makes her happy." ●

BLITZED

by Phil Lovesey

I wish to confess to murdering my husband.” The harassed desk sergeant nodded sagely at the old woman. It was always the bloody same. The cranks and crazies seemed to deliberately wait for his shift to have their fun. He sighed heavily. “Very good, Mrs. . . .”

“Parker. Muriel Parker.” The accent was home counties, the slightly powdered face bright, alert.

“And can you tell us the name of your G.P., love?” Standard procedure; he’d most likely discover the poor old dear had absconded from the local twilight home for the bewildered.

“I fail to see the relevance,” Muriel replied. “I’m here to confess to a major crime, and I demand to be treated with some civility.” Her eyes held his defiantly. “Now run along and fetch DCI Jessop. Quickly. I haven’t got all day!”

The desk sergeant wearily picked up the phone, turning slightly from the neatly dressed woman and whispering. “Sorry to bother you, Guv. A gentle mental’s just bowled up asking for you. . . . No, old girl, she is, spouting something about murdering her old man. . . . Okay. . . I’ll tell her.” He replaced the phone. “DCI Jessop’s on his way down, madam.”

A tight-lipped smile betrayed the irritation. “I do have ears, Sergeant, and I find your manner most discourteous.”

He blushed before taking down Muriel’s details.

Five minutes later, DCI Jessop entered reception. Late fifties, portly, balding, well on the way to his second ulcer. “Mrs. Parker?”

She beamed and offered her hand, scrutinising every line on his puffy face. “You don’t look well,” she said. “Not like the newspaper photograph at all.”

“Mrs. Parker, I don’t mean to be rude, but the sergeant told me . . .”

“I’ve come to confess to murder,” she confirmed, chin jutting proudly.

Jessop shot the grinning sergeant a filthy look. “Do you want to come with me, love? Have a cup of tea, yeah?”

“Very kind, thank you.”

He led Muriel towards a side door, stopping to collect a piece of notepaper from the winking sergeant. He read it and sighed, throw-

ing his eyes to the nicotine-stained ceiling. Gilbert and Sullivan had it bang to rights; his bloody lot certainly wasn't a happy one.

They entered a small interview room stinking of cigarettes and disinfectant. Muriel sat down, eyes twinkling, face as bright as a button, the total antithesis of her world-beaten companion. "Just like those dreadful little rooms in *The Bill*," she said excitedly. "And can I say, Inspector, what a pleasure it is to meet you at last."

Jessop rubbed his brow, attempting to massage away the near-permanent frown. Jesus, was it only ten in the morning? He placed the sergeant's note gently on the scarred desk between them. "Mrs. Parker," he said slowly, trying to muster some empathy for the deluded old bat, "while you were waiting for me, Sergeant Stebbins—"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Stebbins," Jessop explained, raising his voice unnecessarily. "The desk sergeant."

"Frightful man," Muriel replied. "Very rude."

"Quite," Jessop agreed, anxious to move on. "Well, he rang your house and spoke to your husband."

Muriel stared blankly back.

Jessop read from Stebbins's notes. "According to Mr. Parker, he's very much alive and wonders if you could pick up a bag of greengages while you're in town."

The old woman blushed a little. "Well, I couldn't possibly tell Albert the truth, could I? Shock'd most likely kill him."

"So you accept, Mrs. Parker, that you didn't actually murder your husband?"

"Albert?" She looked as confused as Jessop. "I never said I did. Did I?"

"But you told the sergeant . . ."

"That I murdered my husband, yes."

"But he's alive, Mrs. Parker!"

She blinked twice, then smiled. "For goodness' sake!" she laughed. "You think I'd kill dear Albert!" The tiniest of chuckles escaped. "Oh, dear me, Inspector!"

Jessop was ten seconds from the end of his tether. He rose to his tired feet. "Don't forget the fruit, Mrs. Parker," he said through gritted teeth.

But Muriel wasn't to be budged. "My first husband," she calmly announced. "I murdered Clive Upton, my first husband."

Jessop slumped back into the chair. What the hell, it was a slow crime day, the villains were still sleeping off the night before, he was out of the office and away from the paperwork. May as well listen to the old girl for a few minutes. "Clive Upton?" he repeated, trying to sound interested.

"Bastard, he was!" Muriel spat, suprising Jessop with the inten-

sity. "Lazy, idle, two-timing, good-for-nothing little shi—"

"Mrs. Parker, please." Jessop suppressed a smile. He'd never heard such a sweet-looking old lady swear before. "When exactly did you . . .?"

"Kill the swine?"

Jessop nodded.

"Twenty-first October, nineteen forty-one. About midnight."

Jessop wished he hadn't given up smoking. Now would have been the perfect moment to reach for a B&H, light up, draw deeply on the brown poison, and slowly drift a thousand mental miles from this ludicrous woman and the stifling room. Any minute now, he thought to himself, Jessop will barge in with details of the nut-house she belongs in, and it's "Bye-bye Mrs. P." Entertaining while it lasted, anyway. "But it's nineteen ninety-nine, Mrs. Parker."

"So it's about time I told you the truth, Detective Chief Inspector Jessop."

He leaned forward conspiratorially. Playtime was over. "If I were you," he whispered, "I'd let sleeping dogs lie. If you've got away with it until now, then . . ."

"Inspector Jessop!" Muriel interrupted sharply. "I have no intention of any such thing. It's taken me a long time to find you and . . ."

"Me?"

"You, Inspector."

He leant back, scrutinising her carefully. Smartly dressed, neatly presented, honest face. Against all his instincts, he gave her one more chance. "I'm listening," he said gruffly. "Why me?"

She dismissed the question with one wave of her fragile hand. "It was during the Blitz," she said brightly. "I'd been married to Clive for six years. Childhood sweethearts, you know the thing."

Jessop wondered if he could endure the inevitable history lesson.

"Clive failed all the service medicals because he was deaf in one ear. Looking back, I suspect he made it out to be a damned sight worse than it was. He wasn't the type to fall for his country."

"Sensible chap," Jessop replied, wondering if he'd feign deafness if he was married to the acid-tongued woman.

"Coward, more like," she hissed, eyes narrowing at the memory. "He became an Air Raid Patrol warden, walking the streets at night, checking the neighbourhood for chinks."

"The Chinese?"

"Light," she snapped. "It was the blackout. Any escaping light would have given away our position to the Luftwaffe. So he was out most nights, while I was stuck inside on my own."

"Can't have been easy." Jessop observed the beginnings of a tear welling in Mrs. Parker's right eye.

"Then," she sighed, "the gossip started. Whispered words as I queued for rations. Young women, widowed by the war, missing

their menfolk, giggling to each other, sniggering at what a wonderful job Clive had done in their bedrooms."

"I'm sorry," Jessop replied.

"It got worse, got so I could barely leave the house for the ridicule. A local girl was pregnant. It had to be Clive. One night, I followed him. Discreetly, at a distance, through the darkened streets. My heart raced with excitement and dread. I just had to know the truth for myself."

Muriel's voice cracked a little. "He went into a local girl's house. Let himself in, for Christ's sake! Didn't come out for an hour at least. I stood in the street and cried, really cried. Then, the sirens screamed. Thousands of feet above my head, the Germans began bombing the town."

Jessop found himself unintentionally absorbed, hanging on Muriel's every word, watching as she hung her frail head in shame. For many moments she sat perfectly still in the claustrophobic silence, Jessop still wondering why she'd chosen him to be sole witness to her confession.

At last she cleared her throat, looked up, and continued. "There was so much rubble around, Inspector. The whole ghastly thing was so hideously easy." The watery eyes pleaded for forgiveness.

Jessop kept silent, heeding the memory of his own mother, who'd often weep quietly over long-distant memories of the war. How she'd sit him down as if to divulge some ancient secret, then simply mist over with the pain of it all. And in truth, Jessop admitted, there was no way he could ever understand her terror. How could anyone born since the war? Foreign planes in their thousands dropping bombs on our homes? It just seemed too inconceivable.

Muriel blew her nose. "Of course, Clive was shocked to see me standing there. The street was in chaos. Two houses had been hit. I knew I didn't have long before the emergency services arrived. I hit him in the face with a brick. Then again. Then again. He fell down, unconscious." Muriel's pained face appealed for understanding. "I dragged him towards the smouldering building, covered his body with rubble, then left. Running as fast as I could."

"Mrs. Parker," said Jessop gently, "whatever happened, happened such a long time ago. You were upset, being bombed, I mean . . ."

"I murdered my husband, Inspector."

"Was there a post-mortem?"

She nodded. "They put it down to the blast. Four died in the house, and he was found where I left him, buried in the rubble outside. He died a hero. Should have been in a shelter, you see. They thought he was racing to help."

He smiled. "So he fell for his country after all?"

She returned the smile. "The curious thing, Inspector, is that they never found his hat."

Jessop felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise. Hat? Tin hat? ARP hat? Good God, surely not . . . ? He watched as Mrs. Parker reached into her handbag and brought out an article clipped from the local newspaper. "You, in your office, I believe?"

Jessop stared back at his own black-and-white image, beaming from the page, encouraging everyone to join Neighbourhood Watch. He nodded.

Muriel touched his sleeve. He didn't pull back. "I knew it had to be you," she said softly. Her slender finger traced the photo, pointing to a black tin hat mounted on the back wall of Jessop's office. The letters ARP were still clearly visible. "Did your mother ever tell you the truth?"

Jessop shook his head. Could this really be happening? Would the trail end right here, after all these years? "She willed it to me after she died," he replied, a lump building at the back of his throat. "I'd often catch her cleaning it. It was one of her most treasured . . ." He tailed off, bewildered.

Muriel filled in the gaps. "After Clive died, the pregnant girl moved away and had a little boy, but never married. I moved too, but still kept in contact with some of my true friends. They told me the woman was happy, the child grew into a fine young man and joined the police. His name was Jessop, Neal Jessop."

Emotion began to flood through the shaking inspector.

Muriel stood, preparing to leave. "I saw the article quite by chance. It had to be you. The same smile, you see."

Jessop hid his face in his hands. "Clive Upton was my father?"

"And I murdered him. I'm truly sorry for that. Your father may have made a lousy husband, Inspector, but he also made a wonderful son. I thought you deserved to know that."

"But why tell me now?"

She pulled his hands from his head. "So there's no need to look anymore."

The door opened. Stebbins breezed in, stooping to whisper in his guv'nor's ear. "Not a thing on her. Clean as a whistle."

Jessop pulled himself together. "Thank you, Sergeant." He turned to Muriel. "And thank you, Mrs. Parker."

She smiled. "The least I could do after all this time."

Stebbins's confusion was obvious. "Shall I see Mrs. Parker out?" he offered.

"Before you do," Jessop replied, "take her up to my office. There's an old tin hat on the wall that belongs to her. Will you make sure she gets it?"

Muriel shook Jessop warmly by the hand.

"After all," he smiled, "I don't think I need it anymore. And you'll be needing something to carry those greengages home in, won't you?" ●



SHARPER THAN A SERPENT'S TOOTH

by Hal Charles

As the campus bell tower tolled the end of first period, Professor Kirk Heller paused in front of his office mirror. For the first time in a long time he was almost proud of what he saw. A club tie, a hint of a smile, bagless forty-six-year-old eyes, and pursed lips whistling The Byrds' "Turn, Turn." But most of all, it was something the mirror couldn't reflect. After twenty-five years of getting the academic shaft, Heller felt as if he was riding the elevator toward the top floor. Hell, he was actually looking forward to an undergraduate survey class.

Heller scooped up his World Lit textbook and sauntered down the hall to Lecture Room B. Usually nine-fifteen classes at Tilghman drew the Zombie Jamboree—commuters, students with night jobs, and partyers who took a little hair of the dog that bit them the night before to get them through first period. He

dropped his text on the lecture table, his signal that he was ready if they had anything they needed to discuss with him before class began. But today nobody came up. In fact, as Heller glanced around, he noticed the usual Friday conditions—twenty-five percent of the class missing and eyes clouded over with the haze that came from the end-of-the-week partying before everyone went home for the weekend. Such was the price you paid at a regional university, Heller knew.

But today something else was missing. Seat 3A. One Ms. Accord. Ruth, to be exact. Late thirties, early forties—hard to tell. Nontraditional student who always answered his questions with that Eastern Kentucky mountain drawl, that lilt in her voice that had him convinced she sang in her church choir, probably even played a dulcimer she might have made. The tolling of the next bell bore out his fears. Without Ruth to prime the pump, the rest of the class was reluctant to answer even his easiest questions. Once he tried baiting the religious conservatism in most of them by referring to the Bible as “mythology,” not literal truth, but the usual dialogue was not to be.

After class, they silently filed past him, their eyes not meeting his, as though they knew they had let him down. He asked a few if they had any idea why 3A, who never missed, was absent, but they knew less about her than they did the Hebrews.

Heller didn't let the Friday disappointment spoil his weekend. Saturday he completed *Walden* two days before he was due to discuss it with his American Lit class, and Sunday he finished a ten-kilometer run without his right ACL acting up. He celebrated each accomplishment with a six-pack of Coors Light. Monday at nine-fifteen he strolled into World Lit to discover most of his flock had returned from their long weekend—all but 3A. Afterwards in his office, Heller found himself staring down at their unmarked quizzes and wondering what had happened to her. He replayed last Wednesday's class in his mind, but nothing in what she had said or done stood out as indicating a problem. Well, something had probably come up at home. He was used to students missing because they had to help cut tobacco or crown this year's high-school homecoming queen.

First Stories author Hal Charles gave this account in 1980: “Like Ellery Queen, Hal Charles is the pseudonym for a pair of writers. Two thirty-ish English teachers at an Eastern Kentucky university, who have previously written only for academic journals and educational television.” As of this printing, the authors tell us they have published some 500 short stories! ¶

When Ruth Accord didn't show up for his Wednesday class, he called the Dean of Women and got her schedule. Then he phoned the rest of her instructors. They all had the same story. The previous Wednesday had been her last class, she hadn't led them to believe anything was wrong, and she hadn't been in contact.

Friday, before his second-period class, he found himself as nervous as a pimple-laden teenager ready to pick up his first date. Three days of a mediocre World Lit class were beginning to show. Their lack of response had caused his tie to be as loose as a hangman's noose. He strode into class a little apprehensive, his eyes never leaving the pockmarked linoleum floor. He even opened the roll book without looking up, afraid to discover her absence.

He cleared his throat. "Accord?"

No response.

Heller raised his eyes. 3A was as empty as many of his students' minds. No long brown hair rolled into a bun, no multi-fabriced sports coat that looked like it had been put together from an array of Salvation Army "finds." As a result, his introduction of the Classical world was more a tragedy than a comedy, and he cut off his lecture, uninterrupted by a single question or answer, ten minutes early.

As he started quickly out the door, someone called out, "Dr. Heller."

He turned to see 2A, a balloon-faced woman who sometimes wore a nurse's outfit to class. "Dr. Heller," she said tentatively, as though talking with a real-life college professor were against social taboos, "I think I can read people. . . . Well, you seem like you've been a-wondering where Ruth is?"

"Is she a friend of yours?" Heller asked, guessing they were about the same age—and they had sat next to each other the first day.

"We ride together in my truck, seeing we're both from Clement County."

"Uh huh," he said noncommittally, noticing again the peculiar Kentucky habit of identifying not with a town but with a county.

"Well, she ain't—I mean, hasn't been up to the Red Head station at the end of Satan's Hollow this past week a'tall."

Heller couldn't help but be aware of how she pronounced "Hollow" as "Holler." "Think she's sick?"

"Don't rightly know, she being from Ironweed and all."

"I've never even heard of Ironweed," confessed Heller, "but then I've been back in the state only about a year."

"Place's so small it's not on most maps. It's just as you cross from Tilghman into Clement county."

Heller watched 2A fidget. It was probably more than she'd ever

said to a professor before. "If you see her, tell her to drop by my office. She's got a lot of make-up work."

The woman nodded, started off, then stopped. "It's just not like Ruth not being here. I mean, unlike most of us, she really loves college."

Startled, Heller didn't reply. 2A had said what he'd always suspected, but no student had ever before admitted.

Saturday morning was late-September beautiful. Driving east, Heller couldn't help but note how the dry summer had forced orange and red prematurely into the lush foliage. He remembered the legend of General Tilghman, who was said to have first arrived at the site of his namesake college the morning after he paused in his trek from North Carolina in the Clement County foothills. The view from on top had convinced the former second-in-command of the Confederate States of America that one more day of moving west might find him a better locale for his college, which was to be the heart of post-war reconstruction.

But Heller's mind was neither on the historical circumstances nor the country's natural splendor. As he crossed the county line, he found his vision turned inward, toward empty seats and unfulfilled promise—his own as well as that of an older college student. His colleagues always chuckled over faculty club demitasses and crustless sandwiches that Clement County was like a bad B-movie title, *The Land Time Forgot* or *Deliverance, the Sequel*. The two-lane blacktop narrowed and began to twist like a snake sunning itself. The '65 Mustang convertible he had patiently restored seemed to seek out the potholes, and the branches overhanging the road made the Clement County Highway Department seem like a myth. The hillside resembled a long cemetery, as it was dotted with crosses, some white, some locust wood, and some demanding he GET RIGHT WITH GOD.

Maybe Ruth Accord was ill. Maybe she was taking care of a family member. He smiled, recalling the first time a student had explained that he had cut class because his family "got sickness." But Ruth Accord was different. She'd even read ahead. Once, after class, she'd told him that she carried her book around all week, opening it to read at every opportunity. She said she couldn't wait to discuss her "favorites"—*Madame Bovary*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *The Awakening*. When was the last time a student had looked forward to class?

There was no stop light or sign along the road announcing Ironweed. The three buildings just materialized like a mirage. A post office, a pool hall, and a diner. Heller stopped in front of the last, sliding in between two trucks that were almost as old as his vehicle. Someone had once joked that there were more pickups regis-

tered in Tilghman County than cars—he could have believed it of Clement County.

A weathered sign told him he had come to BIGGIE'S. Eye-hooked below it was another—HOME OF BUCKSHOT HINTON AND THE WORLD-FAMOUS BIGGIE BURGER. Heller felt almost embarrassed—he'd never heard of either. Inside, he found the cast of *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Good old boys in bib overalls and long-sleeve shirts despite the temperature being in the mid 80's. Heller sat down.

"What can I do you for?" said a whiskered man in a white shirt and apron who reminded Heller of Gabby Hayes dishing out grub at the chuck wagon.

"Guess it'd be illegal to come in here without ordering a world-famous Biggie Burger," joked Heller.

"Ah, you heard of it," the man said and walked away satisfied.

"French fries?" called Heller.

"Comes with the meal. 'Long with cole slaw and some 'a Momma's canned beets. 'Course, an RC."

"'Course." Heller didn't bother to order his burger rare. Usually in this part of the country, it came well done anyway. When the cook set an RC can down in front of him, Heller asked, "You know a Ruth Accord?"

"Ruthie. Yeah, she's Preacher Accord's."

"Daughter?"

"Wife." Heller was momentarily taken aback. He'd never seen a ring on her finger; but then again, a lot of mountain people couldn't afford them or didn't believe in them.

"S'cuse me," said the cook. "Somebody I got to help."

Heller's eyes followed him over to the counter. A heavy, unshaven man in a Bengals baseball cap limped up to the counter. The cook went to the grill, picked up a stuffed white bag, and handed it over. As the customer hobbled out, Heller half noticed that no money had changed hands, but his mind was more interested in drifting back to a day early in the semester. He recalled how in his World Lit class he'd been discussing the Bible's two accounts of the Genesis story. When he'd referred to the Old Testament as the "Hebrew epic," a look of shock, then near-disgust had crossed Ruth Accord's face. Her hand shot up like a striking rattler.

"Sir," she said, "I need to be certain of something. Are you talking about sacred writings?"

"I am."

She regained her composure and sat in silence. When he'd gone on to mention the Bible in the same breath as *The Aeneid* and *The Iliad*, she crossed her legs, which was difficult to notice as she was the only one wearing a long skirt in the midst of a bluejean world.

Finally, when he'd pointed out that some scholars called the two Biblical versions of the Creation "contradictory," she'd blurted out, "No, sir. They're the literal truth."

"Maybe not so literal," he returned. "Some think, for instance, the so-called 'six days' of creation aren't exact, but just familiar units—like months, years, eons."

"Some people really believe that?" she said incredulously. "I've never heard of anyone questioning the word of the Lord." Her face flushed. "That's blasphemous."

"That's another way of thinking," Heller said, "a different perspective."

"You ain't et your Biggie Burger," interrupted Gabby Hayes, pointing down at Heller's untouched plate. "Something wrong with it?"

"No," said Heller. "I was just . . . thinking." Then to get away from feeling ill at ease, he asked, "Food free today? That guy who just came in didn't pay."

"That's because he's Buckshot Hinton," the cook said proudly.

"I'm not from these parts—"

"I know'd that."

Heller smiled. "Buckshot's the guy on the sign."

"Kentucky Long Rifle. Most famous person in this town, I guess, since General Tilghman passed through. Once threw for nine touchdowns against Richmond Model. Saw it myself, I did. Buckshot coulda been a great pro quarterback. You know, he wanted to play for the Bengals."

"Why didn't he?"

"Went down to Eastern Kentucky University. Tore up his knee in practice. You believe that? One a' his own teammates hit him. Never would've happened to him here. Town's proud 'a what he did for Clement County High, so we kinda take care of him. Least we can do for him, putting us on the map and all."

From the back room of the restaurant came a loud bang.

"Watch that table, boys," the cook cried out. "I need it tomorrow after the service."

"Service?" said Heller, taking a bite of the Biggie Burger.

"Revival, act'ly. Preacher Accord's church burned down last summer, so I let him use the back room. Truth is, we made us a bargain—he lets me sell refreshments after his words gets folks lathered up, and I don't charge him no rent. No separation of church and state in Ironweed, no way." He laughed, showing a gap where his front teeth should have been.

Maybe, Heller reasoned, Ruth Accord had stayed home to help in her husband's revival.

"You ought to come back tonight," said the cook. "You ain't never seen Preacher Accord. When he gets a-cooking, so to speak,

well, he's something. And if'n you ain't never heard Ruthie sing, you oughta. It's a preview of what you're gonna get behind the pearly gates, know whut I mean?"

Heller put down the meat that had been so overcooked it was devoid of taste. "I just might stay," he said. "Could be the closest I ever get to angels."

The Red Head station 2A had mentioned was easy to find. About three miles south of Ironweed, the 1950's-style red-and-white-checkerboard tile was a throwback to the time when stations were "gas," not "service." Directly behind it, to the left and right, two buttes rose up toward the scorching afternoon sun. Heller pulled in front of the middle of three red pumps and got out. He reached into the cooler in the Mustang's rear seat and withdrew a cold Coors Light. There wasn't a county to the east or south of Tilghman that was wet, and he was very dry.

"Fill 'er up?" The speaker was a heavyset man in bib overalls who had spoken while balancing a lit cigarette between his lips. With oily hair and a red, weather-beaten face, he looked to be anywhere from twenty to fifty.

"Absolutely. Mid-range stuff ought to be about right."

"Good, 'cause that's all I got."

As the attendant inserted the nozzle into the Mustang, Heller wiped his mouth and said, "A Ruth Accord live around here? I understand she meets her ride every day at your station."

"You're a tourist," the attendant said.

"How could you tell?"

"You're the first person I ever seen in this area with a Tilghman College T-shirt. Round here most folks bleed blue for the Wildcats."

"I teach at Tilghman."

"I said to myself when you drove up with that ice chest in your rear seat, 'Billy Don, he ain't no bootlegger.'" The attendant threw down his cigarette next to the pump. "Yeah, Ruthie's lived up Goshen Knob 'bout three years now." He gestured at a dirt road that disappeared to the right.

"That's when she married Preacher Accord?"

"That's right." He lit up another Camel. "Funny thing is, she used to live over there"—he pointed to the left—"up Fire Mountain."

"Her family up there?"

The attendant shut off the pump. "Hell, no. Her first husband."

Heller swallowed hard, almost choking on the Coors. "You don't say."

"I'd say more if you got another cold one in there." He gestured at the Mustang's backseat.

"Sure," said Heller, tossing the man a can.

"Let's sit over here in the shade," suggested Billy Don.

The two men walked over to the north side of the station and sat down in wooden chairs. "Now if you were to decide you wanted to visit Ruthie, you make sure you go to the right, up Goshen Knob. It's a whole lot safer."

"What do you mean?" said Heller.

"Hinton family's lived up Fire Mountain long as I—anybody—can remember. After World War Two they stopped raising tobacco in their fields. Old Man Hinton went down to the Kentucky River where hemp was grown for the war effort. Got them some good seeds."

"The Hintons are pot growers."

"Probably some of their best customers are your students."

"I wouldn't doubt it," said Heller. "The way a few of them in my first-period class have that glazed-eye look, I think marijuana's become the breakfast of champions."

"I know it's the breakfast of our ex-champion."

"Of course, Buckshot Hinton."

"You heard 'a him, I see."

"Not really. I just saw him down at the diner."

"Well, you won't see no 'Home of Buckshot Hinton' sign on Billy Don Weatherly's gas station."

"I take it you don't care for him."

"You're pretty smart for one of those college professors." He crushed the can and tossed it in a rusty dumpster. "Say, you got another one of these?"

Heller returned to the shade with two cold cans.

"Yeah," said the attendant, after pulling the tab open with his teeth, "you learn a lot about a man who stuck his hands up your butt for four years."

"What?"

"I was the center on Buckshot's high-school team. You know, that night he threw for seven touchdowns he was higher than that mountain up there. Fact is, Buckshot couldn't play unless he did a couple of joints before the game. Some guys threw up, some guys banged their head against their locker, but old Buckshot sat down on the head and toked."

Heller felt like he'd been led a long way down a backwoods path. "And Ruth used to live up there?"

"Day after graduation she and Buckshot got married under the Clement County goalposts and moved up there with Old Man Hinton and that crazy brother of Buckshot's, Shawn."

By the time Heller left the gas station, Billy Don had run through the genealogy of all of Clement County and had consumed so many Coors he hadn't bothered charging for the gas.



Light and darkness were fighting for control of the day by the time Heller arrived back in Ironweed. He had driven around the county, checking out some of the sights Billy Don had mentioned. The whole time Heller had been wondering if he ought to head up Goshen Knob to talk to Ruth. The more he thought about it, though, the more he realized he wasn't sure what he'd say. Goshen Knob wasn't exactly one of those "Hi, I was in the neighborhood" drives.

As he pulled the Mustang in front of the restaurant, he heard loud music from the rear. A steel guitar, drums, and a piano sounded like a cross between rock and gospel. With a drumbeat as heavy as those in the old Tarzan movies, the music was louder and even more jerky than a 60's acid-rock group. Getting out of his car, he pulled the last Coors from the cooler. He realized his T-shirt was sweat-drenched, and between the dusk and beer buzz his perceptions weren't all they had been the last time he'd pulled up here.

For a split second he had a vision of himself as the old Heller. The dipsomaniacal, gypsy academician who stayed at a school about as long as it took the liquor and welcome to wear out. Now he had returned to his old alma mater, Tilghman College, and had stayed for about a year. Was the old song right and he had "laid around and played around this old town too long"? What did he want of his life? Roots or some alcoholic tilt-a-whirl? Long ago his cup was full (and not of liquor). He was the shining light his senior year, but then things had gone to hell. A broken marriage, a dead son; burying himself in liquor bottles and anonymous women, then moving on before reality could catch up to him and say "Tag." Yeah, he was Tilghman College's version of Buckshot Hinton. Maybe that's why the Clement Countyman's story so fascinated him. A Tale of Two Citizens, both gone to the dickens, victims of unfulfilled promise.

Suddenly a female voice as clear as a cathedral bell jolted him back to the present. He was standing in the restaurant's back room, with what appeared to be nearly all the residents of Ironweed. The instruments were silent, as was most of the crowd. The singer's voice seemed as pure as Judy Collins's in her heyday. Heller stood mesmerized as "Amazing Grace" floated across the room with the delicacy of angel wings.

Heller climbed onto a chair. Dressed in a pure-white robe, Ruth Accord stood in front of the crowd, her eyes closed. He could understand how her voice alone could melt the heart of the coldest nonbeliever. Her hair, which had always been rolled up in his class, was let down, falling below her waist. When she finished, the silence was broken by applause and a chorus of Amens.

Abruptly the music started up again. Several people threw their arms heavenward, and a few more began to shake as if they were standing on an electrified grid. In the front, men and women began to spin like human tops.

The music grew louder and faster. More and more of the crowd joined in. In the twirling and shaking, several fell on the floor, appearing to faint, but then speaking in languages Heller had never heard before. On the outside, like a frame around the picture, stood boys and girls, their gazes blank, not really understanding the transformed adult world.

But once Heller's eyes spotted the woman in white, he focused more on her. A man, whom he presumed was her husband, with black pants, suspenders, and a white shirt rolled up to the elbows, stood beside her, red-faced, exhorting the congregation in words Heller couldn't quite hear. The two of them then walked over to a large wooden box that sat on the dirty floor and reached in, their backs to Heller.

When they turned around, Heller noticed Ruth and the man were both holding wiggling snakes. They appeared to juggle them the way kids played with a Slinky toy. All the while the music swelled, the crowd swooned, some taking snakes from the leaders. Then Ruth and the preacher returned to the box and came back to the enraptured throng with more serpents. Soon well over a dozen people stood in the front of the crowd in a practiced frenzy, handing off snakes to each other.

Heller had heard about snake-handling, but he'd never really seen it. Supposedly it was a test of faith. The truly righteous would be protected from venomous bites, and looking at the diamond-headed serpents Heller had no doubt the snakes were poisonous.

At that moment Ruth Accord looked up, her eyes temporarily locking on Heller's. For a split-second, as she was handing a long rattler off to another worshipper, she lost concentration. The snake struck at her, and Heller couldn't be sure if it had bitten her.

Shaken, Heller jumped from his chair and pushed his way through the crowd and out into the parking lot. He leaned against the Mustang, feeling his legs shake, his body sweat, and knowing the beer had suddenly disappeared from his system. If ever he needed a drink . . . but the cooler was empty.

He climbed into the driver's seat, fumbling for his key.

"Dr. Heller," he heard a voice call clearly.

He looked back. Appearing in the doorway, clad all in white, was Ruth Accord, looking profoundly angelic.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Did the snake bite you?" he said.

"No, I'm fine." She smiled. "Why are you here?"

"Well, you missed class, and you seemed to be enjoying it, and I wondered why a good student would—"

"Woman, what do you think you are doing out here? The Lord's business demands we be inside."

Striding out the door, his face fiery in the dimly lit parking lot, was her husband. "Amos," she said, "I was—"

"It's my fault," said Heller. "I came here to—"

"I know who you are," charged the preacher. "You are the blasphemer filling her head with all those godless notions, making her doubt her faith with all those unholy books."

"My job is to make her think for herself," said Heller, defending himself.

"We all need but one book, and this is it." He held up a Bible. "The inspired word."

"Perhaps you'd better leave," she suggested. The preacher grabbed his wife's arm and pulled her behind him.

"Are you coming back to school?" pressed Heller.

"No matter what, I refuse to allow her to return to that place of iniquity," proclaimed Preacher Accord.

"Dr. Heller, I—"

"Woman," interrupted her husband sternly, "you will do as I say, and that includes not talking to this messenger of evil. Now get back in there."

Slowly Ruth retreated into the back room.

Leaning over the car, Amos Accord stared into Heller's eyes with anger. "I know why you are in Ironweed. Up here, we have stray hounds that come wandering in looking for something to scratch their itch, but we know how to take care of them. Just remember, I'll do whatever I have to in order to keep her away from men like you."

"You threatening me?"

But Heller couldn't get up because the preacher held the door shut.

"You take my words however you want, Pro-fes-sor Heller," he said, his words wrapped in total disdain.

Heller had been sitting in the Mustang for a while when he realized he was alone in the lot. More than anything in the world at that moment he wanted a drink. As if granting his wish, across the street yellow neon flashed MILLER. He got out of his car and headed toward the light.

As he opened the door, he had that feeling of déjà vu. Chilling cold, the odor of stale beer, a female country singer moaning in a gravelly voice from the jukebox, smoke so thick his eyes watered instantly. He navigated his way through the gauntlet of fluores-

cently lit, green-felt tables, each man gripping a cue stick as if it were his manhood. This was no billiards tournament with tuxedoed gentlemen and quiet-voiced announcers—this was a pool hall.

Heller stopped at the counter. When the manager came over, Heller said, "Give me a beer."

"Foreign or domestic?" said the manager, mimicking a fancy waiter. "Hey, pal, in case you haven't heard, this is a dry county. We don't serve no liquor."

Heller pulled out a bill and set it down.

The manager, whose face was covered with more hair than his T-shirt was with grease, snatched the five, then reached under the counter. "Bud Light do ya?"

Heller had the beer downed before the five-spot disappeared into the cash register. He put another five on the counter and accepted another bottle. This one he sipped slowly, trying to restimulate his taste buds. He looked around toward the loudest sound. In the back, two men were arguing. One he recognized. Buckshot, the local legend. A younger man, almost Buckshot's size, was brandishing a cue stick. The manager ran over to separate them, then came back to the counter leading Buckshot.

"Damn, Donny," said the manager. "Don't know nothing but fighting. You still arguing about the same old thing?"

"None 'a your damned business," said Buckshot surlily.

"No matter what you say, has-been," called Donny, "I'm gonna marry Esther."

"Over my dead body, sonny boy," slurred Buckshot.

"That can be arranged," returned the younger man.

"You ain't man enough," screamed Buckshot, starting toward his adversary.

"Old enough to get what I want—"

The pool-room manager stepped between them. "You get outta here, Donny. You still owe me for that stick you broke last month beating on Chad Willis."

Donny looked at the manager sideways, then left.

"Man, I hate to drink alone," said Heller. "Give me one of whatever Buckshot drinks and put it on my tab."

"You ain't got no tab here, pal."

Heller slapped down his last ten. The manager handed him two Buds.

As he started away, Heller said, "I hope the law doesn't find out you're selling in a dry county."

The manager howled. "Pal, I am the law here."

Heller set a bottle down in front of Buckshot, who was standing by a rear pool table.

"'Preciate it," said Buckshot with the air of someone who expected people to help him. He began to rack the balls.

"Understand you used to play football?" tried Heller.

"A little."

"Way I heard it, you were great."

Buckshot straightened up. "Well, that was a long time ago. If it wasn't for muh knee . . ."

Heller took a sip. "Young kid giving you trouble?"

"They think when they get the tools, they can do the job."

"So the kid thinks he's a fighter."

"That's not exactly what I meant." Buckshot picked up a cue. "Donny wants to marry up with my fifteen-year-old, Esther."

"Oh, what's your wife think about that?"

"My ex-wife, Ruth, is dead set against it. Says Esther's too young to be tied down. Got too much of a future."

Heller hadn't factored that in. So Ruth and Buckshot had had a child.

"But," continued Buckshot, taking a gulp, "that holier-than-thou Bible-thumper she's married to claims a woman's only place is to be fruitful and multiply."

"Who does your daughter listen to?"

"Sure as hell not me." Buckshot took a long draw, then suddenly set the bottle down hard so that some beer spilled on the table. "Know when I screwed up?"

"When you got married?" Heller guessed.

"Sort of." The ex-athlete leaned against the table with both hands. "When I stopped listening to this." He tapped his chest. "My daddy wanted me to play football. My ma wanted me to go into the family business—raising dope. Ruthie Jean wanted me to go to college and take her along."

"What did you want?"

Buckshot stared past the overhead light. "Back when I was a kid I used to work down by the river for old man Jenkins. He had this sawmill and lumberyard. Nothing better than the smell of fresh-cut logs. No better feeling than the sweat of doing a job good. Old Jenkins told me someday he'd sell me the mill. Said I was a natural at picking out the right boards for the right job. But I screwed up—I didn't listen to my heart."

Heller finished his beer. "What's it telling you now?"

Buckshot spun around. "That's easy. It's telling me I got to make amends for all the trouble I caused."

The whole way back to Tilghman that night, Heller wondered what the local legend had meant.

Heller gazed blankly into the mirror at the face covered with stubble and shaving cream. The half-closed eyelids were proof of a

night spent mostly awake. He didn't really like the face much. It belonged to a man he thought he had left behind six months ago, a man who ran for the bottle when the world was too much with him. Half shaven, Heller stepped into the hot shower.

Somewhere about dawn he had made the decision to return to Ironweed and the reason surprised him. He had spent most of the night trying to figure out why he was drawn to Ruth Accord and her situation. For the longest time he had thought Preacher Accord had been right, that he had followed her to the mountains because of the usual physical attraction. But that wasn't it; that might have been the motive of the person he had been. No, Ruth Accord, he had come to realize, was why he had gone into teaching in the first place. In those early days of being an instructor, he had wanted to share the excitement of learning, of discovering things about the world and himself, with others. In Ruth Accord he had found that old feeling with someone who was not only willing, but wanted him to share that joy of learning. The truth was, she was important to his rebirth, to his getting away from the booze, the academic highway, and the meaningless relationships.

As he stepped out of the scalding shower, he knew he had to return to Ironweed. It was important to make his discovery clear to Ruth, to her husband, but most of all to himself.

The short trip seemed to take forever, but by the time he reached the Ironweed sign he had rehearsed what he wanted to say a dozen times. He had anticipated their responses and resolved he would just present his case, not lose his temper, then hop in his Mustang and leave. This was Sunday morning, and there was only one place Ruth and her husband would be, the back-room church.

Wheeling into the gravel parking lot in the rear of the restaurant, he noticed a crowd outside the clapboard building. He got out, aware they were all facing the building and talking among themselves. Why weren't they inside? Were they still waiting to go in? He circled the crowd, all the while hearing comments like, "This is horrible," and, "I can't believe it."

Standing in front of the back door was the pool-room manager. A revolver holstered on his hip, he was wearing a light brown uniform shirt with a badge and nameplate. The too-small shirt was as grease-covered as the one he'd worn the night before.

"What's going on?" said Heller when he'd worked his way to the front of the crowd.

The manager said, "I'm glad you showed up. Now don't go nowhere. I need to talk to you."

"About what? A revival?"

"Don't be cute with me, pal." He grabbed Heller's arm and

shoved him toward the open doorway.

Just inside, Heller jerked away. He was about to say something to the local "law" when his eye caught white on the floor at the front of the church.

"Oh my God!" he said. "That's not—"

"Ruth Accord," interrupted the manager. "She's dead."

"What . . . what happened?" Heller stammered as he walked haltingly toward the fallen figure. People didn't just suddenly die.

"Don't touch anything, pal. I called the state police over to the Richmond post. Trooper ought to be here soon."

Heller paused a few feet away from her. She was lying on the platform, directly beside a wooden lectern. "How . . . who . . ." The words wouldn't come.

Preacher Accord hurried through the door. "Cecil," he said to the manager-sheriff, "I spent last night up on the mountain praying. What's going . . . No! No!" He fell to his knees beside the body.

"Deacon Fort found her like that, Amos, when he came this morning to set up chairs," said the sheriff sympathetically.

The preacher pointed to the white robe. "Look at this. A couple of places. Small tears in pairs. A little blood."

"I know," said the sheriff. "Pears to me like a snakebite."

"I don't know how many times I told her to be careful around those crates when she came in to set up her music," said the preacher solemnly. "It's my fault. I should have been here with her."

"You saying this is an accident, Amos?" questioned Cecil.

The preacher stood up. "Sorta." He pointed to Heller. "If'n he hadn't 'a showed up causing trouble. . . . Her mind just wasn't on the right things. He had her all confused."

"Mama!" came a shriek from behind.

Heller saw that the source was a girl in her teens who looked a lot like Ruth Accord. The girl ran toward her mother.

Preacher Accord stopped her. "It's too late, child."

"Mama, Mama, Donny didn't mean it. He loves me. He didn't mean it." She fainted into the preacher's arms.

An explosion filled the room. Gradually Heller came to realize a gun had gone off. He glanced around. Standing in the corner, a revolver in one hand and a limp snake in the other, was the sheriff. "I think we got our killer," he said.

"You and your damned snakes!" shouted Buckshot Hinton as he limped through the door. "I told Ruthie one of these days they'd bite her."

"Not now, Hinton," said the sheriff.

Buckshot snatched Esther from the preacher's hands. "It's gonna be all right, baby girl. Your daddy's here now."



Monday morning's sky was a deep, endless blue unsullied by clouds, but Heller scarcely glanced up as he made a slow trek toward campus. He had absolutely no desire to instill knowledge in the masses, to look into their nameless faces, to notice the empty seat in his World Lit class. He had spent most of Sunday in Ironweed, repeating his story to a trio of Kentucky State Police investigators who were more interested in the outcome of the Bengals-Ravens game than the fate of Ruth Accord.

As soon as he had reached his garage apartment that evening, he'd taken out the bottle of Maker's Mark he'd been saving for a special occasion and placed it on the kitchen table. Then, like a painter preparing to do a still-life study, he began staring at it, circling around it, contemplating the light diffusing through it from different angles. He re-replayed the events of the past few days, usually stopping with the frozen image of the woman in white lying on the floor of the makeshift church.

Occasionally his mind had wandered. The Kentucky State Police trio of hear-see-and-speak no evil had issued a preliminary finding of "accidental death." The good news was that he wasn't officially a suspect, but neither was anyone else. Was that right? he wondered. Donny (Esther's boyfriend), Buckshot (the ex-husband), Preacher Accord (the current husband)—not one of them had been able to account for his time the night before. Donny claimed he'd driven his pickup truck out to Satan's Hollow and spent the night in it—alone. Buckshot said he staggered home and collapsed in his double-wide—alone. Preacher Accord admitted no one had been up on the top of Goshen Knob with him. Donny claimed he'd never really hurt anybody, "leastways Esther's mama." Buckshot said he'd gotten over Ruth a long time ago and they were both dead set against their daughter getting married before she got out of high school. Preacher Accord admitted, though, he may have been a little jealous of Heller and Buckshot, "I know my wife was no Jezebel."

Still, periodically Sunday night Heller had gazed into his crystal ball of a bottle and seen Ruth Accord in the back of the church early Sunday morning. And looming beside her was the shadow of a man, a man she couldn't see, a man who turned the box of deadly snakes over on top of her, then watched as she stood screaming like some modern Medusa while the fangs repeatedly pierced her skin.

The only thing Heller knew for certain was that when he'd awakened Monday morning, the whiskey bottle stood still untouched in the middle of the table.

Now, as he passed the bronze statue of General Tilghman astride his great horse Bael, Heller wondered what had really happened to Ruth Accord. The truth was, he was as interested in

her now as he had been while she'd been alive. He paused to watch the early morning sun glance off the statue and the general's enigmatic smile. Some claimed it was a smile of satisfaction because he'd successfully pursued into Kentucky and put to death the slayers of his family. Others said the general was satisfied because here in the wilderness he'd created a post-Civil War beacon that had triumphantly led the South out of the dark days of Reconstruction. Heller started up again, his pace even slower, trying to console himself that some mysteries might never be explained. Like who was he now? The old irresponsible, indifferent-to-all alcoholic, or the new model? His shadow preceding him, Heller couldn't tell if he was still falling or starting to rise.

He finally reached Wethington Hall five minutes before his class was scheduled to start, only to find the long-promised repairs had finally started on the century-old building and he had to use the side entrance. He climbed to the first floor, then started down the hall. Standing outside Lecture Room B like an anxious sentinel was a familiar face.

"2A," he said.

"Professor Heller, I went up to Letcher County this weekend to see my family. I got back late last night and found this here stuck under the door of my double-wide." She paused in her breathless recitation and handed the plain white envelope to him. His name was scripted on the outside. "I recognized Ruth's handwriting on it. I hope the letter explains why she wasn't waiting for me again this morning at the Red Head station."

"Thanks," Heller said. The envelope felt strangely alive to him, as though he could feel a heart beating inside it. "Go ahead. I'll be right in."

His fingers were trembling as he ripped open the envelope. Inside was a neatly creased piece of notebook paper. Slowly he unfolded it. As he began to read, he had the unnerving sensation that Ruth Accord was standing in front of him, answering the question he'd never been able to ask her.

Professor Heller,

How sharper than a serpent's tooth is the pain of ignorance and the agony of knowing I will never get to do all I want or be everything I might have been. Tonight, after seeing you here in the midst of my life, I have come to accept like my sisters before me—Hedda, Edna, and Emma—that some circumstances are more powerful than my strongest desires. I thank you from the depths of my soul for starting me down this path. I am sorry I will never know where you might have led me.

With gratitude, but regret,
Ruth Accord

Alone in the wide, high-ceilinged hallway, Heller found himself shaking. It was as though her words had turned him inside out. He blinked his eyes rapidly, trying unsuccessfully to deny the moisture that was springing up. Paradoxically, he had reached her, but in so doing, lost her. He had awakened her to the outside world, but then had cursed her by exposing her to something she could never realize.

Suddenly the conversation he'd had with her about her favorite works took on a new light. Like her fictional forebears, Emma Bovary, Hedda Gabler, and Edna Pontellier, Ruth Accord had found that the only way to escape her frustration was by taking her own life. Heller's entire body shuddered at the image of her reaching into that wooden box of serpents and holding one till its fangs struck—and then again.

Would anybody else recognize the symbolism in her chosen method of demise? Her faith was not her husband's. Ruth's paralysis had started long before the serpent's tooth punctured her flesh. Maybe it was enough that he knew. He tore the note into small pieces, then dropped them into the trash can outside his room.

Sometime later a more composed Heller entered the noisy classroom that abruptly became silent as he tossed his books onto the front table.

"Before we get to *The Odyssey*," he said, choosing his words carefully, "I'd like us to launch our own personal odyssey by getting to know each other before . . . it's too late. Why don't we start up front. 2A, tell us a little something about yourself—your background, your dreams . . ." ●

A DISTASTEFUL SCENE

by Pat D'Amico

The decorator ran amok—
She had ruffled every space.
We all just stood there—horror struck—
As she bolted with the lace;
But scrawled upon a frou frou mirror
With a pretty purple pen
Was, "Someone stop me, for I fear
That I may frill again!"

A LURKING FEAR

by H. R. F. Keating

Miss Unwin knew at once who had killed young Jane. It was the boy whose governess she had been for the past three years, Newton Codrington, only son of Professor Julius Codrington, pillar of Cambridge University's renowned Cavendish Laboratory. But how was she to make that implacably logical physicist believe his only son, his pledge to the future, had within him the streak of primitive wildness she had

detected almost as soon as she had become his governess? The buried, uncivilised past which had now led him—she could not doubt it—to batter horribly to death the only one of the servants, the impudent twenny Jane, not fifteen years of age, who had not had permission to go to the nearby Midsummer Fair.

Certain though she was that skinny little Jane had been killed by Newton—the whole circumstances led logically to only that conclusion—she was certain, too, of one other thing. When her widower employer came home and was told what had happened, he would decline absolutely to accept her unsupported assertion. A woman, and one who had been already given her month's notice as being no longer able to instruct nine-year-old Newton in the logic of mathematics: He would dismiss her every word.

But, whatever her lack of acknowledged educational qualifications, she knew Newton a great deal better than his father did. He seldom saw the boy other than for the half-hour each evening when Newton was summoned to the library. And there Professor Codrington did no more than put to him a stream of mathematical questions.

"Seven twelves? Fourteen eights? A hundred and twelve divided by seven?"

H. R. F. Keating is not only a mystery author; he is one of the genre's finest scholars. In 1987, his book *Crime and Mystery: The 100 Best Books* was published in the U.S. and soon became a standard reference.

In this new story, he takes a step back in time, giving us an historical in which the question is not whodunit but how to prove it. †

"If $6m$ minus 8 equals 10, what is the value of m ?"

"Seven pounds, nine shillings, and fourpence raised by thirteen and a half percent?"

"What is πr squared?"

Over the three years of her employment the questions had grown progressively more difficult. Before long, anticipating herself what they might be, she had taken to carefully coaching Newton beforehand. In the early days, there had been one or two outbreaks of frightening violence in the nursery after Newton had been impatiently upbraided for failing to produce a correct answer. It was these sudden eruptions of primitive rage that had set up in her a lurking fear of what might one day come.

So she had known she was right about Newton having battered to death, like a straw-stuffed doll, thin little Jane. Right from the moment when, returning to the kitchen the dishes of the cold supper that had been left for her, turning to close the door of the servants' W.C., seemingly left open against the rules, she had come upon the girl's flailed body in a welter of dark blood on white-tiled floor, lime-washed walls. Despite the shower of glass shards from a smashed pane in the window above, one glinting fragment adhering grotesquely to the sticky blood on the nape of the girl's pitifully thin neck, she had been certain there had been no intruder.

More than once in the past she had had to rebuke Jane for speaking teasingly to Master Newton. She had never—it was scarcely a possible matter to refer to—told the girl that Newton, if roused, had his appalling savage streak. But now, standing with the unpainted wooden door of the W.C. tight closed behind her, conscious of the blood-smelling draught wafting in from its wide-open window, she felt a sharp pang of regret at not having found some way of warning her.

Then an odour other than the sweetish smell of drying blood came to her nostrils. A sharp, lemony tang. She looked up and down the short passageway, and at once saw in the direction of the kitchen a thin puddle of wet, with beside it a glass rolled over onto its side.

Yes, she thought, I see it all now. What precisely must have happened. Newton, just before the eight o'clock bedtime his father insists on, would have gone to the larder where, always in summer, there stands on the wide slate shelf a large jug of barley water covered with a circle of muslin weighted with sewn-on beads. Carrying back his cooling glass, he must have met Jane just emerging from the W.C., and she must have said something perhaps as innocuous as *Just off to beddy-byes then, Master Newton*. And it had been enough. Sturdy Newton, hardly the smaller, must have seized her bodily, hurled her onto the hard surface of the W.C.'s tiled floor, and, to judge by the dark blood splatterings

reaching high up the walls, done so again and again.

But, she added to herself, for all that I have long known Newton—there was, worst of all, the business of the tortured cat—to be unable in the end to hold back the primitive violence within him, I never could bring myself fully to believe he would kill a fellow human being. Yet that is what he has done now. I know it. The fear I have felt is justified at the last.

But where is he, she thought suddenly. Is he here, in the house? Or . . . Or has he run off into the evening? Scared by what he has done?

But, no, that night a year ago when he vented his rage, at long length, on a cat whose midnight yowling had woken him, he had simply brazened it all out. And had been believed by his father, for all that she herself had seen him, in his nightshirt, coming gleefully back from the stableyard when she, in turn, had been woken by the animal's ear-splitting shrieks.

So, will I find Newton in his bed now? Feigning sleep? Almost certainly I will. But I must go and see, whatever risk may lie there. Perhaps, after all, I may be wrong. Perhaps those shining splinters of glass in that pool of dark red blood really do mean someone tried to break in, that Jane came upon him. And was killed because she had.

But she knew this was not what had happened. No, Newton was clever, if not as much of a young mathematician as his ambitious father wished him to be. But he was quite capable, after he had sated his fury, of attempting to lay a false trail. Yes, he must have slipped round to the stableyard, put his fist or a stone through that windowpane, and then lifted the latch and pushed the window open. Look at the way immediately after the business with the cat he had furnished himself with a glass of water to account for his presence out of bed.

So, first to peer in at Newton. And then to ask the only other person in the house, Mr. Franklin Laming, the tutor recently appointed to remedy her own supposed deficiencies as a teacher, to go posthaste into Cambridge itself to summon the police. He had been, so Mrs. Whitaker, the housekeeper, had told her, lying all evening under a sheet in his room prostrated by a heat headache, even declining her offer to bring him supper. But he would have to rouse himself now.

She found Newton, of course, in his bed. He was lying still under the covers, breathing deeply, as if in sleep—too cunning to put on any imitation snores—though in the usual way he would have been awake and reading at this still-light hour. She took one quick look at the clothes tumbled on the bedside chair. Newton might, in the heat of it all, have left his shirt there and, if the

walls of the W.C. were anything to go by, it was bound to be blood-stained.

But there was no shirt in the heap on the chair. Yet nor were there any underclothes. So, had Newton done what she had drummed into him he must do each night, put his soiled clothes into the washing basket on the landing outside? Softly she closed the door and thought of Newton, lying there with the bedclothes right up to his chin, carefully opening one eye to make sure she had gone.

She tugged off the tight-fitting lid of the basket—it gave a sharp, protesting squeak—and saw the handful of discarded clothing at the bottom. Newton's clothes. Not until much later at night would his father put in his own soiled garments, as on the floor above, she herself, Mrs. Whitaker, and presumably the newcomer Franklin Laming would put theirs into the similar basket outside their rooms. So, will there be here the blood-marked shirt that will convince Professor Codrington, surely, that his son has done this appalling thing?

She bent and extracted the bundle. Two stockings, a summer vest, a pair of drawers. And nothing else.

So Newton did not, bewildered in the aftermath of what he had done, simply thrust his shirt away with his other clothes. No, he must have seen the blood and hidden it.

If my suspicions were in need of any corroboration, she thought, here it is.

But what had Newton, with all the simple, untrammelled cunning a child can rise to—cunning she had noted and frequently circumvented in all of the pupils under her governess's eye—done with this blood-spattered garment which would provide, if she could find it, her proof?

Not the moment to challenge him now. His murderous rage could well flare up again. And in rage Newton could be even stronger than herself. There had been only one occasion, in her first days in the house, when a sharp and necessary rebuke of hers had produced that savage response. But she had not forgotten it. The solid, cannonball-like six-year-old body hurtling at her, sending her crashing to the nursery floor. The little, digging hands going for her face, her eyes. Not for nothing had she adopted, ever since, the habit of never turning her back after she had had occasion to utter a correcting word, however mild.

Then from outside she heard the sound of a cab turning in at the gate. Newton's father back already? It was possible. Sometimes he chose to work in the evening in the private laboratory he had had built on at the side of the house. Or, perhaps he had returned expecting supper, not remembering that this was the evening when, each year, all the servants from Mrs. Whitaker

down—all, on this occasion, but impudent Jane—had leave to go to the Midsummer Fair.

He was going to be disappointed.

Taking her courage in both hands—she felt it almost as an object, a jewel box held between them—she ran rapidly down the stairs.

“Sir . . . Professor . . . Sir, I am afraid I have some terrible news.”

Tall, and made taller by his silk hat, sombrely dressed in black, long face cut deep by vertical creases, mouth a single prisoning line, pince-nez on its wide black ribbon firm on nose, he turned to her. And palpably sighed.

What is the fool of a woman trying to tell me now? He might have spoken the words out loud.

“I have to tell you, sir, that—that someone has killed the between-maid, Jane. Has brutally battered her to death.”

So, no, she had not managed it. She had not brought herself to say, *Sir, I have to tell you that your son, Newton, has brutally battered to death the between-maid Jane.*

“What? What are you saying? Are you telling me one of the servants has been murdered?”

“Yes, sir. I have only just found her body. She is in the servants’ W.C., sir.”

“Tush. Some fainting fit. Girls are known to . . . What nonsense is this about battering, brutal battering? Come, Miss Unwin, pull yourself together.”

For a moment Miss Unwin saw again the sight she had begun to try to put out of her mind. Jane’s thin, horribly savaged body, the showered glass all round it with the one glinting fragment adhering to the thin neck, the spattered blood reaching halfway up the little W.C.’s lime-washed walls.

“Sir,” she said, “I think you had better see for yourself. And in the meantime I will go and ascertain if Mr. Laming, who is suffering from the headache, will be able to go to the police station.”

“You will do nothing of the kind. When I have examined the girl, I will decide whether it is the police or a medical man who should be summoned. If there is a need for anyone at all. And now where is this—this place where you say the girl is to be found?”

Miss Unwin, just letting herself think how little the master of the house knew about those within it and the conditions of their lives, told him where he could find the servants’ W.C. For a moment she considered telling him, too, to take note of the odour of barley water in the passageway outside. But at once she thought better of it. To herself that sharp lemony smell had been a clear indication of what had taken place. But, she saw, anyone wishing to believe that what had happened had not occurred could easily enough invent a dozen seemingly logical reasons why lemonade or barley water might have been spilt in the passage there.

So she said nothing but, as soon as Professor Codrington strode away, she went far enough up the stairs again to be able to keep Newton's door under observation. It was possible that the sound of his father's raised voice would make him decide, after all, to run away.

She did hear, after a little, what seemed to be faint noises in the soft interior darkness above. She listened intently. But before she could decide whether the sounds were coming from Newton's room or from Franklin Laming's one floor higher, Professor Codrington came stamping back. His colourless face had taken on a yet paler, dun shade.

"Laming? Where is the fellow? He'll have to take my horse and go to the police."

Then Franklin Laming came hurrying down, tugging on a worn woollen dressing-gown over shirt and trousers. Ferociously, Professor Codrington gave him instructions.

"But, sir, I am not well. I fear I will hardly be able to saddle your horse."

"What—what the devil—Where's Rogers? He'll saddle Bucephalus. I suppose you can ride, Laming?"

"Rogers has gone to the Midsummer Fair with the other servants," Miss Unwin put in quickly. "But Mr. Laming has his bicycle. I suppose in view of the emergency he will be able to ride that into Cambridge."

"Very well. So go at once, man. Ask at the police station for Inspector Wood. He knows me. He'll see the fellow who did this is hunted down quickly enough."

Franklin Laming hurried back upstairs.

And Miss Unwin asked herself, once again, how she could possibly tell her coldly hostile employer that it was no *fellow* who had killed poor Jane and then made his escape.

But she must try.

"Sir," she said, "there is something I feel obliged to inform you of."

"Yes, yes. I daresay you may know something arising from this business that may be of some small assistance. But you can tell Wood anything you may know, or think you know. In the meantime, we must take thought for Newton. Do you have any reason to suppose the disturbance may have woken him?"

Miss Unwin straightened her shoulders and took in a full breath.

"Sir, I believe, in fact, that Newton may have been awake and out of his room when Jane was killed."

"You mean he may have seen . . . But the harm that would do to him . . . Incalculable. Incalculable."

Now. Now I must say it. Otherwise he will go on not paying attention to anything I tell him. He listens little enough in the ordinary way. Now he must hear me.

"No, sir. It is worse than you think. Much worse. Sir, it is very possible that it is Newton himself who is responsible for what has been done."

"What are you saying? I don't understand. How can Newton be in any way responsible? Are you saying he left open the window the burglar entered by? Hardly a likely circumstance, Miss Unwin."

Into it once more. When will he ever understand? How can he understand?

"What it is that I am saying, sir, is that—" No, she could not do it: not come out point-blank with the accusation. "Sir, I believe the pane in that window was smashed from the outside after—after Jane had been killed, sir. Perhaps you failed to notice, but there is a splinter of glass adhering to the poor girl's neck. The pane was broken and the window opened after she was killed."

"Woman, you're talking nonsense. All this business has affected you. Go to your room. I shall send Mrs. Whitaker to you."

"Mrs. Whitaker, like all the servants, is at the Midsummer Fair. Or, perhaps, now returning from it. Sir, it would be best if, before they come back, you are made fully aware of what may have happened. The fact is that no one was in the house all evening except for Mr. Laming, who, I understand, was in his room feeling unwell, and Jane, myself, and Newton."

Now at least Professor Codrington was paying her attention. In his eyes, behind the glinting pince-nez on its broad satin band, there was a look of steely anger.

"Do I understand, Miss Unwin, that you are suggesting that there has been no intruder in the house? I trust you are not hinting that Mr. Laming, whom I have appointed as my son's tutor, is in some way responsible for the death of that girl?"

For a moment Miss Unwin made herself consider it. But, no. She had Mrs. Whitaker's word for it that the tutor was lying in bed ill, too ill to want to eat. And, studious, pale of face, unable even to contemplate saddling up a horse, it was hardly possible to see him as a savage murderer.

"No, sir, I am not suggesting that Mr. Laming had anything whatsoever to do with this terrible business. What I am suggesting—"

Another sucked-in breath. The last.

"Sir, I am putting to you the possibility, or more than the possibility, that it is Newton himself who killed Jane."

There. Said. Done. Let the heavens fall.

"Woman, you have gone out of your mind."

"No, sir. Sir, I am sadly afraid that it is Newton who has gone out of his mind. Sir, I have every reason to believe from my experience over the whole time I have been Newton's governess that he has in him a deep-seated tendency to ungovernable rage. To a

rage, sir, which I can only describe as akin to that of the savage. And, sir, I believe—I have to believe—that in just such a fit of rage this evening Newton battered that poor girl to death.”

Professor Codrington did not move so much as a muscle. But from him there emanated a chill contempt that told Miss Unwin that she was never going to convince Newton’s father that his son was capable of doing what she knew that he had.

Not unless she could face him with irrefutable proof.

She was in her room, sitting by the door from where she could see Newton’s door on the floor below, with her window open onto the moon-soaked front lawn stretching down to the bank of laurels and the high brick wall beyond them, when she heard the rattle of a trap arriving at speed and, looking out, saw Inspector Wood and two caped and helmeted constables jumping down. Professor Codrington had told her eventually, with unceasing chill anger, that as soon as it was morning she was to leave the house. But she had done nothing towards packing her valises with the acquisitions of her three-year stay.

Instead she had sat and watched Newton’s door on the landing below. True, he had had the opportunity between his eight o’clock bedtime and when she had gone to see him there in his bed pretending to be asleep to have crept out and hidden that bloodstained shirt somewhere. But she thought it was unlikely that he had. Out of his room, he would have known he might at any moment have encountered herself or Franklin Laming, whom he did not know to be lying ill, or even Mrs. Whitaker back from the fair.

So the likelihood was that the shirt had been stuffed out of sight in his room, to be disposed of by daylight next day. But Newton was perfectly capable, lying awake and listening to the voices coming up from the hall, to have thought that in the general disturbance it would be safe to sneak out and find somewhere better to hide the telltale evidence. So she had sat watching and thinking what she ought to do and how to do it.

About ten o’clock, with the last light of the long day rapidly fading, she had gathered that the servants had returned. Below, she had heard Professor Codrington, his voice unwavering, tell Mrs. Whitaker that Jane had been killed by an intruder and that she was to see that all of the servants, except for Rogers, went at once to their beds.

Still listening, leaning then over the banister, Miss Unwin heard the groom being questioned. And one thing had emerged that had pleased her. Question and cross-question as he might, Professor Codrington did not succeed in budging Rogers from his assertion that on the long straight road leading past the house to the field where the fair was held he had seen no stranger in all

the time since the party of servants had set out until, in twos and threes, they had begun to straggle back.

"Come, at the fair you must have been caught up in your amusements, whatever they may have been. You would have been quite unable to notice this thief creeping away. Isn't that so?"

"No, sir, begging your pardon. I never went in, seeing as I don't hold with such childishness. But Mrs. Whitaker had said I was to go along the road with the other servants and that I did. But I stood there at the gate, smoking a pipe or two all the while, and I can tell you, sir, no one came out of our house and went along the road one way or the other. Not one single soul."

"Very well, the fellow made off across the fields at the back."

"I doubt he could, sir. The rain we've had this past month and more, sir, the floods are mortal deep right across the fen as far as the Cam herself."

"Nonsense, man. There must be a path the fellow could have got away by."

"Yes, sir, there be a path right enough. But 'tis as deep under water as anywhere."

"Then you must be wrong about the depth of the flood. That's all there is to it."

But then Miss Unwin heard Mrs. Whitaker, somewhat timorously, come to the groom's support.

"I really do not think Rogers is mistaken, sir. I have not been able to have vegetables from the kitchen garden for a fortnight or more. It is well under water."

"If you say so. If you say so. Then, Rogers, you must be mistaken about your watch on the road. I daresay you nodded off once or twice. That's the logical explanation."

Professor Codrington had told Rogers then not to go to bed but to wait until Inspector Wood arrived. Miss Unwin retreated to her post at her door, from where she could continue to keep Newton's door below under observation.

But had the boy already tried to run away, managed to get out of his window and down to the ground? No. Escape that way was impossible. Though a Virginia creeper ran up the wall there, its vines, not long planted, were too thin to bear any weight. She had even pointed out herself the progress they were making, how the leaves on them had not yet turned to the deep, luminous red of autumn, when just a week before she had been giving Newton a nature lesson restricted by the spreading flood waters to the immediate surrounds of the house.

Hearing Inspector Wood coming back from viewing Jane's body and speaking to Rogers in the kitchen, she stepped cautiously out onto the landing once more and descended a few steps. Perhaps an inspector of police, a supposedly logical male, would be able to

convince Professor Codrington where she herself had so calamitously failed.

"Oh, we shall lay the fellow by the heels, sir," she heard the inspector's assertive voice floating up from the open library door. "Never you fear. He can't have got far. Not with the fields flooded the way they are."

"So you think, Inspector, he went that way and not out by the road?"

"Seems he must have done, sir. I know Jem Rogers myself. He's a canny fellow, and if he says he was looking along the road all the time that his fellow servants were at the fair, then I believe him."

"Very well. Then the sooner you set off across the fields the better. Your man certainly won't have got very far in the floods."

"Very good, sir. And I daresay you'll find me coming out here first thing tomorrow morning to tell you we've got the villain safely in a cell."

"I hope so, Inspector. I hope so. So I'll wish you good night. And good hunting."

But, Miss Unwin thought, I would rather take Rogers's word for the floods as well as for the road. There's no one out there for Inspector Wood and his constables to haul off to a cell. Jane's murderer is a strong young boy, though he's no more than nine, in that room just below.

But how am I to convince Newton's father of this? How am I even to see Professor Codrington again? I know him. He will decline absolutely to have anything to do with the vexatious female he sees me as. In the morning he will breakfast in his room and then leave immediately for the Cavendish. He will expect, when tomorrow evening he comes back home, that the exasperating governess he mistakenly took into his house will have gone forever. He will leave it to Mrs. Whitaker to see to that.

So how can I catch him unawares?

For a few minutes she traced out the logical path of her employer's time until the hour she herself would be constrained to leave. Could I go into Cambridge, to the Cavendish? But he will have instructed the porters he is not to be disturbed. And the same will apply if he dines in college tomorrow evening.

No, trace back again. Back to this very moment. And then work forwards.

And, yes, I have it now.

She waited, ears cocked at her open door. She heard at last the professor come out of the library and begin to march with leaden legs up the stairs to bed. Was he thinking that perhaps, after all, the intrusive female he had been harbouring beneath his roof might be right about his precious, mathematically inclined Newton? If so, no doubt he would quickly be pushing the thought down.

She stood listening, still.

Then from the floor below she heard the sound she had been waiting for. A quick little shriek of hardened reed on hardened reed. The lid of the washing basket on the landing being tugged from its seating, the sound she had heard earlier looking to see if Newton's shirt was there.

In a moment she had run in the dark down the flight of stairs and was confronting the boy's father, as formidable in long night-shirt as he had been in black tailcoat, in one hand a bundle of underclothes, in the other his bed candle.

"Miss Unwin," he said, lifting the candle holder high, "What are you doing? Get back to your room at once."

"Professor Codrington, I am here to ask you what is there already in that basket whose lid you have just removed?"

"What—What do you mean?"

"I mean, sir, would you be good enough to look into the basket and see if Master Newton left his shirt there when he retired to bed."

"His shirt? I suppose he did. Doesn't he always? What are you—"

"Sir, if you fail to find the boy's shirt, won't it be because it has got badly bloodstained?"

For an instant she thought Professor Codrington was going to turn on his heel and stride back into his bedroom.

But then, darting her a look that combined disdain and, perhaps, a substratum of pure fear, he dropped his own clothes down onto the floor and plunged his free hand deep into the basket.

Before he had fully withdrawn it Miss Unwin realised that, despite her conviction, he was, after all, clutching a shirt. A boy's plain cotton shirt.

Her heart plummeted.

"Now, Miss Unwin," Professor Codrington said, voice icy as the east wind, "will you once and for all abandon this extraordinary notion you seem to have embraced."

"No, sir."

She heard herself bring out the words almost before she knew what it was she had worked out she had to say.

"No?"

"No, sir. If you care to bring your candle closer to that shirt you will see that it was not worn earlier today. It will be fresh from the iron."

She hardly let Professor Codrington look at the shirt and confirm what she had guessed. "So, sir, don't you see that in simple logic this must mean that Newton, soon after I had looked into that basket and found no shirt in it, must have realised—he would have heard the squeak of the lid being lifted—that I had noticed what was lacking? And that he then attempted to rectify

the omission? He had his opportunity. When I was telling you, attempting to tell you, what had happened."

She watched on the professor's face the train of thought she had gone through being repeated. And saw him come to the same *quod-erat-demonstrandum* conclusion.

"But then . . . then are you saying that the shirt Newton was wearing this evening will be in his room somewhere. And that it will be stained with blood?"

"Yes, sir, I have taken care to keep a watch on the door since I spoke to you, and I have not heard it opened. Newton has not left his room."

Professor Codrington took three rapid steps along the landing, candle flame guttering, and thrust open his son's door.

Not waiting even to see whether he had woken the boy, he set the candle down and began flinging aside the garments on the chair. Nothing. He dropped to his knees like a felled oak and peered under the bed.

"No, sir," Miss Unwin said. "You will not find it anywhere in the room."

She had seen Newton sitting up now, bolt upright in his bed. In the flickering candlelight there was an expression of malicious glee on his face.

It was some comfort to her that his father, though still on his knees, was between herself and him.

"I have been asking myself what I should do with such a telltale garment if I had had to hide it," she said. "And it appeared to me that the logical thing would be somehow to get it out of the room."

"But you have said you had the door under your observation."

"There is a window, sir."

"He has thrown it out? Is that what you are claiming?"

He ran to the window and flung up the lower sash.

"No, sir. It will not be on the ground below. It might easily be seen there."

Professor Codrington drew in his head. Miss Unwin crossed the room swiftly, at every step keeping her eyes on Newton.

She reached the window, leaned out, and felt round about among the thin, clinging vines of the new-planted Virginia creeper.

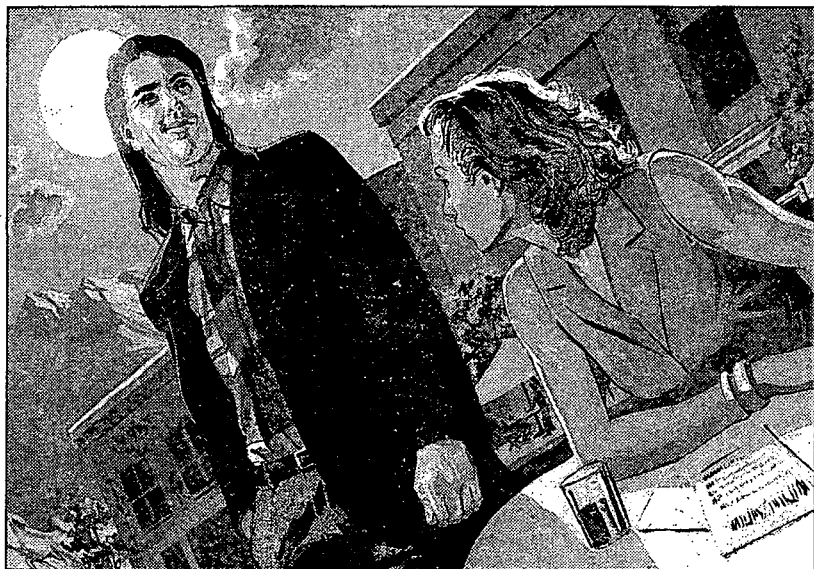
"Well?"

"Nothing, sir."

Behind her, Newton laughed.

"If," Miss Unwin said, "something has not been pushed in among the creeper below the window or to the side, there is but one explanation. It will have been pushed in above."

She twisted round, reached up. Touched cloth. Gripped it. Pulled. And turned to face Newton's father with, in her hand, a once-white shirt deep-stained with blood. Proof. ●



KILLING THE SIXTIES

by Melodie Johnson Howe

What do you wear to meet an ex-lover who is now an aging rock star with a new liver? Well, a used liver, but new to him.

I decided on my blood-red linen dress.

The last time I saw Leon Ashe was in Chasen's about ten years ago, just before the restaurant closed for good. He was drunk and in a fight with the maître d' over the location of his table. As the waiters dragged Leon unceremoniously out of the restaurant he spotted me sitting on the banquette with my husband. "Diana!" he yelled. Then in his plaintive drunken voice he began singing the song he had written about me in the sixties; it was appropriately named "Diana," and its success had made him a giant rock star.

I didn't see him or hear from him again until last week, when he called to announce that he had a new liver. He asked if I'd come up to Oak Point, where he now lived, and spend the day with him. He suggested I meet him at a restaurant called Avanti. I was between movies, as most middle-aged actresses are, and with some coaxing on his part I agreed to drive up the coast to see him.

The reason I needed coaxing was because I never trusted Leon Ashe, even when I was madly in love with him back in the sixties. Leon thought of women the way he thought of the songs he wrote: the next one was always going to be Number One. The trouble with Leon is that "Diana" was the best song he ever wrote. You can hear it today in elevators and if you're holding on the phone. Funny how time equalizes everything. After all these years, the significance, the genius of Leon Ashe is reduced to muzak. An outcome he never anticipated in the sixties.

There was another reason I hesitated to see Leon: He always had an ulterior motive. Leon wanted something. I knew one thing he wouldn't want—to be lovers again. I'm too old for Leon now, even though I'm ten years younger than he is. His current and fifth wife is twenty-two. But, as I said, I had time on my hands, and despite everything, I always had a soft spot for Leon. After all, he wrote a beautiful love song for me when I was a tearful eighteen-year-old girl.

Oak Point is an expensive little village, nestled between the San Ysidro Mountains and the Pacific Ocean, just south of Santa Barbara. From my home in Malibu, it took me about an hour and a half to get there. The village consists of small shops, four or five Italian restaurants, and homes worth millions and millions of dollars. Many Hollywood people have moved up to Oak Point to get away. But I've been around long enough to know that you can't get away from Hollywood. Like smog, Hollywood moves and settles wherever it wants to. You can't shake it off like water, or sand from the beach. And it doesn't matter if you're a success or a failure, you're always breathing it, living it, hoping for just one more chance from it. In other words, while the Hollywood people were retreating to Oak Point, they were still waiting for the phone to ring.

Avanti is a small, comfortably chic outdoor restaurant. I parked the car, smoothed my blood-red dress, combed my determinedly blond hair, put on some fresh lipstick, and went into the patio area. Shadowed from the sun by market umbrellas, the Oak Pointers were busy eating. The women, mostly middle-aged, were lean, taut, and as determinedly blond as I. The men had an air of

When Melodie Johnson Howe writes of Hollywood, it is of a place she knows. She once described herself as "one of the last of the starlets," with appearances in such movies as *Coogan's Bluff* (Clint Eastwood) and *Moonshine War* (Alan Alda). She has also taken parts on a variety of TV shows, including *Bewitched* and *Lou Grant*. However, more than the glamor of setting, what makes Ms. Howe's work stand out is keenness of insight. ¶

robustness about them that comes more from money than fitness. Behind them the San Ysidro Mountains rose in jagged grandeur. Clouds carved ragged white holes into a brilliant blue sky.

"Diana? Diana Poole!" Leon stood when he saw me.

"Hello, Leon."

We embraced. Then, holding me at arm's length, he leaned his head back, squinted as if I were a newspaper he was trying to read without glasses, and said, "You look great."

It's the one compliment that fits all middle-aged women, and because of that it irritates the hell out of me.

"So does the Grand Canyon, Leon," I laughed.

"What?" he muttered, distractedly, eyeing a lone man sitting at a table, reading a newspaper.

"You're looking well," I said.

"Feel wonderful. Sit down. Sit down."

His once shoulder-length black hair was now gray and shaggy. His dark beard was only a memory, but his eyes were still the color of glistening oil. His deeply lined face was thinner, causing his aquiline nose to appear larger. He wore a perfectly pressed blue work shirt and jeans. His black sports jacket was cashmere.

"God, I can't tell you how good it is to see you, Diana." He smiled his charmingly crooked smile.

"It's been a long time." I smiled back.

"But that's going to change."

"What is?"

"Now that your husband is dead. Oh, I'm sorry to hear about that, by the way. I should have written you. When did it happen?" He talked fast. His dark, furtive eyes roamed the patio. He wanted to get the subject of death over with.

"More than a year ago." Again the feeling of being set adrift from everything I knew and loved swept through me. Waiting for it to pass, I looked up at the mountains; the clouds had lowered and were trying to drape themselves over its peaks and ridges. The feeling of loss ebbed and I let my gaze drift back to Leon. For the first time I noticed the half-empty bottle of white wine.

"I saw you in that movie," he announced, "where you played Uma Thurman's mother. Kind of a small role for you, wasn't it?"

"It gets tougher the older you get."

"It doesn't have to." He poured himself a glass of wine. "Is Uma seeing anyone?"

"You asked me to come all the way up here to find out if Uma Thurman is seeing someone?" I joked.

"I just wondered, that's all." His voice was serious. "Possibilities, you know what I mean?"

The waiter swooped by, tossed menus on the table, and poured me a glass of wine.

"We'll have another bottle," Leon ordered.

"Should you be drinking?" I asked when the waiter left.

"I have a second chance at life, Diana," he said excitedly.

"That's wonderful. But I thought that drinking and drugs is what got to your liver in the first place. I remember when you were on stage and told everybody in the audience to drop acid."

"But that's just it. I'm gonna do it all over again, Diana. Well, not acid. Though I think for a short period it did make me more creative. Back then I would've tried anything to be more creative."

"Do what all over again?"

"I'm going to live my life over. How many people get that chance?" He downed his wine. "It took me thirty-some years to need a transplant, so I figure I have another thirty years before this one gives out. Then it won't matter. Who wants to live past eighty?" he asked, sounding like the young Leon I had once loved.

"I remember when we didn't want to live past thirty. I don't think that's the way it works, Leon. Do your doctors know you're drinking?"

With a suspicious glance he leaned close and whispered, "Is that guy staring at me?"

"What guy?" I looked around.

"Jesus, Diana, don't be so obvious. He's sitting alone. Pretending to read his newspaper." He sneaked a peek. "He's not watching me now. You can look."

I peered at a man who was about Leon's age sitting at a table for two. He had a slight belly, thinning grayish-blond hair, and was dressed in khakis and a baby-blue polo shirt. After sipping his beer he patted his neatly trimmed moustache and seemed to be thoroughly engrossed in the *Wall Street Journal*.

"He is reading his newspaper, Leon."

"The doctors say this happens with a transplant. It's a kind of temporary paranoia. You know, you feel guilty for getting to live while the others . . ." He paused, shifting restlessly in his chair.

"Others what?"

"Others on the list. The ones that didn't get the liver, the ones who've been waiting a long time." He tossed back some more wine. "Let's face it, it helps to have a name, it helps to have money. I took advantage of that. Why shouldn't I? I was dying. People wanted me to live. I wrote some great songs, man. They still love me for that. I was part of their youth. No, I helped create their youth, their memories. That's why I want to start writing again. I owe it to them." He slammed his hand on the table. A sparrow scavenging for bread crumbs flew away. A few heads turned. The man reading the *Journal* never looked up.

"That's why I wanted to see you, Diana. You were there when it all started for me. Remember?" He grinned charmingly and

poured the rest of the bottle into his glass.

"Of course I do."

"I was sitting at the bar in Martoni's."

Martoni's was a restaurant located near the recording studios in Hollywood. In the sixties it became a hangout for the music people.

"You were with some guy," he said. "You were crying."

"Yes, I'd just broken up with him. God, what was his name? I can't even remember why we were angry at one another."

"He wanted to marry you, Diana."

"That's right. And I wanted to be an actress. I was only eighteen, the last thing I wanted was marriage. What was his name?"

"His name doesn't matter."

"John! John . . . something. God, I thought I would never forget him. What was his last name?"

"He's not important," Leon said testily. "It's what happened that's important, Diana. I had been watching you from the bar."

"John. John . . . God, I almost had it."

"Forget the last name. You got up and went to the restroom. He got up and left the restaurant. I couldn't believe a guy could leave anyone so beautiful as you. You looked like Marianne Faithful."

"Even Marianne Faithful looked like Marianne Faithful in those days. When I returned to the table you were sitting in John's place. I was still crying. And without saying anything you handed me your handkerchief. No, your bandanna. It was a very touching gesture."

"And then I asked you your name, remember?"

"And I told it to you."

"And while you cried I wrote the lyrics for a song on the back of a cocktail napkin. I wanted to cheer you up."

"Very sad words for a very sad young woman."

"I want to do it again," he declared.

"Do what again?"

"Your husband is dead, which is similar to that guy walking out on you," he attempted to explain.

"It's not similar at all, Leon."

He leaned back in his chair and asked, "Why did you marry Colin anyway?"

"I loved him." What an inadequate phrase. Why does it always sound defensive?

"You loved me. And?"

"And what?"

"What other reason?"

"He never cheated on me," I teased.

"How do you know?" He smiled.

"I know."

"I cheated on you. And?"

"And I loved the way he wrote. I loved his words." Colin was a

screenwriter and novelist. I have his two Oscars on the mantel. They are cold and heavy.

"And you never loved my words except for that one song. In fact, you stopped loving me when it became a hit. Left me just when I needed you the most," Leon complained.

"After you wrote 'Diana' you became terribly self-destructive."

"We were all self-destructive in the sixties."

"Not all of us. Just what do you want to do again, Leon?"

"I want to write you a song, Diana. Like I did in Martoni's."

We stared at one another. He was grinning, eager. I wasn't. I was feeling uncomfortable.

"Well, that's very sweet, Leon, but . . ."

"Sweet? Sweet! It's not sweet. All my other songs were never as good, were they? I mean, it was my voice that made all those stupid lyrics I wrote sound meaningful. My whole career, I kept trying to equal that one damn song. Every time I had a new album out it was compared to 'Diana.'"

"It happens."

"It didn't happen to the Beatles," he barked.

"Let me get this straight. You want to write me a new song. A song as good as the old one so you can have a number-one record again. You don't need me for that. Go do it."

Abruptly his mood shifted. "Every time I saw you up on the screen you reminded me of that song, and that you left me," he accused, furious.

"You left me. For another woman."

"I thought she would spark something in me the way you had. Only better. What was her name?"

"It doesn't matter." It was my turn to be testy.

"We always argued, didn't we?" he said sadly.

"Yes." I sighed.

"I just want to write one more great song. Is that such a terrible thing? And I want to do it with you, because you were there." Excited, he grabbed my arm. "I know I can have another hit." His jacket fell open, and I could see a gun in a holster attached to the side of his waistband.

"A gun?" I blurted.

"WHERE!" Leon jerked around in his chair. Another bird flew. A few more heads turned.

Lowering my voice, I said, "Attached to your waistband, Leon."

"Jesus Christ, don't do that, Diana. You scared the hell out of me." Hand shaking, he emptied his glass. Then he added, defensively, "I have a permit."

"To own a gun? Or to carry it on you?"

"How the hell do I know? Who reads the small print?"

"What are you afraid of, Leon?" I tried to keep my voice calm.

"I'm not paranoid," he protested. "I know that's what the doctors think. Temporary paranoia. But it's not true. Look around you. This isn't the world you and I grew up in. It's changed."

I looked around. Their stomachs filled with pasta and wine, the Oak Pointers leaned comfortably back in their deck chairs. The sun had lowered, the clouds had turned an unexplainable pink. The mountains were becoming a soft purple.

"Leon, you're living in one of the wealthiest, safest communities there is. That's what's changed."

"Someone wants me dead," he said flatly, reaching into his pocket for a crumpled piece of paper.

He handed it to me. Large letters, cut from a glossy magazine, were glued to the paper forming the sentence: **YOU TOOK MY LIFE.**

"When did you get this?"

"Soon after I moved up here. It was just left in the mailbox. Someone knows where I live."

"Were there other messages?"

"Two more over the last six months saying the same thing." His gaze darted to the lone man, who was now eating a bowl of Santa Barbara mussels.

"Why isn't that guy with somebody?"

"Maybe he's waiting for someone."

"But he's already eating. Nobody eats alone in this town. You can drink alone, but you can't eat alone. Don't you see?"

"See what?"

"Maybe it's him."

"Leon, he's just a man having lunch. Settle down, please."

"I can't. What if I took his wife, or daughter or son? Maybe he had a loved one on the list. Maybe I got the organ that was to go to someone he loved."

"That's all kept private. They don't tell people those things. No one could know. . . ."

"You can find out anything you want to in this world, Diana, if you have the money and the need."

"Hey, Leon, my man!" A short round man in his twenties, wearing a black coat, black silk shirt with no collar, black slacks, black woven slippers, and earrings, patted Leon's back. "How ya doing? I just came up from L.A."

"Steve!" Leon leapt to his feet and began pumping Steve's hand.

Steve turned to his companion and gushed, "Leon Ashe. The legend." His companion nodded vaguely, watching their waiting table.

"How come you didn't return my phone call?" Leon demanded.

"We'll talk, Leon." Steve edged quickly away. He and his friend sat down near the man who was eating alone.

"Do you know who that is?" Leon settled back in his chair. I shook my head.

"Steve Tinker. The number-one record producer. He's got three records in the top ten. I remember when I had two. He called me when he heard I was dying. Said how much I'd formed his views on music. Said he wished that he'd had a chance to work with me. Said he wouldn't be where he was today if I hadn't made the records I'd made. Especially, 'Diana.'" Leon stopped talking and lapsed into an uneasy silence. The lines deepened around his mouth, and he began to nod his head as if he'd just figured out something.

"I didn't die, Diana," he said harshly. "I lived. I called Steve Tinker back to see when he wanted to work with me. But he never returned my phone calls. Not one. I'm tired of being a freaking legend, Diana. I'm gonna show them. I'm gonna do it again. But I need you." He was pleading now.

"What do I have to do with any of this, Leon?"

"You were, you *are* 'Diana.' Don't you see? You were better than acid."

"How's your wife?"

"Young. She doesn't even know who Three Dog Night is. You don't think I can do it again, do you?"

"I think you don't *have* to do it again, Leon."

"I gotta take a leak." He jumped up and loped a wide circle around the lone man, who was busy plucking a mussel from its shell.

I took a sip of wine and for a brief moment wondered what my life would have been like if I had married John what's-his-name. He didn't want me to be an actress. I remembered that. So I would've ended up the wife of an insurance salesman? A banker? To me, John had represented what we were all afraid of in the sixties. Stability. He was hard-working. Earnest. But there was something about him, something I had responded to. What? I couldn't remember. And what were we doing in Martoni's? I must've taken him there. I was young and wanted to be a part of The Scene. And then I met Leon. Now, Leon wants to go back to that time, that moment. Or does he just want to be young again, and not afraid of death?

The number-one record producer got up and came toward me. "You a friend of Leon's?" he asked urgently.

"Yes."

"I did a good deed and called a dying man expecting . . ." He paused, dabbing at his small lips with his napkin, trying to find the right words.

"Expecting him to die?" I helped.

"Yes. So tell him to stop calling me. Or I'm going to start taking those calls of his as threats, as a form of stalking." He made an attempt at looking thoughtful and asked, "Didn't I just see you in

something? You played Uma Thurman's mother in *Like Daughter*. You were great."

"Bette Davis was great."

"Is she seeing anybody?" he asked.

"Bette Davis?"

"Uma Thurman."

"Yes."

"Tell Leon to lay off." He clamped shut his small petty lips, stopped to shake someone else's hand, and returned to his table.

Leon did his unintentionally funny lope around the lone man, who was now dipping bread in his broth, and sat down opposite me.

"Where's the other bottle of wine?" he asked, rubbing his hands together.

"I'm hungry. Let's eat."

We got the waiter's attention, ordered lunch, and Leon got his new bottle.

Whispering, he asked, "Did you see the way he was looking at me?"

"The record producer?"

"The guy eating alone."

"He's not looking at you, Leon."

"He was."

"Maybe he knows who you are. Have you ever thought of that?"

"Why would he know?"

"Because you're a legend. Remember?"

"It's not that kind of look. He doesn't admire me. I can tell. I think I'm being followed."

"Did you go to the police with the messages?"

"What good are the police?" Not waiting for an answer, he quickly changed the subject back to us. "You and I may have argued, but we were magical together, Diana."

"We were miserable together, Leon. The minute your record came out and went to number one you changed. You lost your sense of humor, your wit. You spent your entire time, no, your entire career, trying to recreate that one record."

"I was an artist."

"Stravinsky was an artist. Picasso was an artist."

"Are you saying I wasn't? Are you saying I didn't know what I was doing?" he exploded. A wild look appeared in his dark eyes. A few people turned.

I lowered my voice and tried to reassure him. "I'm saying you wrote one hell of a song. But you were a better performer. Your best hits were with other people's songs. You didn't need to write another 'Diana.' You still don't need to do that. Find some rock standards, record them. That's what you need to do. Go out and perform. Rock-and-roll, now, is middle-aged and sober. Stop drinking."

"You've never understood me, have you? It was the singer-song-writers who were the freaking artists. I didn't want to be some parrot mouthing other people's words. I forgot what kind of shrew you are. Even at eighteen you had a tongue dipped in venom."

"Pen."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"I didn't ask you to come here to give me reality checks. When I was dying all I could think of was you. Thank God I lived so I could remember you as you really are. You haven't aged that well, Diana," he observed spitefully.

"At least I have my own liver," I snapped back.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was a stupid reply to your attempt at a hurtful remark."

"No, you meant you're free from guilt. You meant you haven't taken something that really belongs to someone else. That's what you meant."

"I can't carry on this conversation anymore, Leon. I'm sorry, but we always end up hurting each other. I never should've come."

"No, you hurt me. I never hurt you," he persisted dangerously.

The lone man at the table stood. Holding his paper, he walked toward us.

"Excuse me, are you Leon Ashe?" he asked, slightly embarrassed.

Leon blanched. Trembling, he reached inside his sport coat, fumbling for his gun.

"Leon, don't." I grabbed hold of his arm. He shoved me away.

The man looked confused. "I just wanted to say that you wrote one of the greatest songs. You are Leon Ashe, aren't you?"

Leon pulled his gun out. But somehow he'd got it by the barrel. Attempting to get it pointed at the man, he knocked over the wine bottle: It shattered on the pavers. The man took a quick step back. The Oak Pointers began to move nervously in their chairs. Leon got the barrel pointed in the right direction. The man retreated some more.

"Leon, don't!" I screamed.

The sound of the gun cracked through the alfresco dining. Patrons ducked under their tables. Sunglasses flew, birds flew, wine glasses toppled.

"Leon!" I breathed in.

Still aiming the gun, Leon stood. The man froze. Then Leon dropped his gun, clutched his chest, and fell to the ground. The man let his newspaper fall, displaying his own gun. We looked briefly at one another as he placed it on the table and walked out to the parking lot.

"Call for help," I screamed, kneeling by Leon.

Blood ran from his mouth. His eyes were half open. I felt for a

pulse. Leon Ashe was dead. The record producer was on his knees, waving his napkin as if he were surrendering. The customers, most of them flattened on the floor, began reaching for their wives, husbands, lovers, friends, sunglasses. I hurried out to the parking lot.

Eyes closed, the man leaned against a Range Rover. He clasped his hands tightly in front of him in a desperate kind of prayer. Sensing my presence, he slowly looked at me.

"Hello, Diana."

"John Hartford." I'd finally remembered the last name of the man who had left me in Martoni's all those years ago.

"I wrote you a poem on the back of a cocktail napkin." He spoke in a calm, quiet voice. "I left it for you on the table to let you know how much I loved you. I thought it would bring you back to me. That it would show you that I had more in me than just wanting to be a banker."

"You wrote the words to 'Diana'?"

"I was the romantic. Leon was a thief."

"But why kill him?"

"Leon got away with everything. Even my words. Even you. The day I read he was dying was one of the happiest days of my life. But then he got a liver transplant and moved to Oak Point. I put messages in his mailbox to scare him. But I knew he wasn't going to leave. He destroyed my youth; I wasn't going to let him destroy my retirement. I read about your husband's death. I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"My wife died recently."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"You grew a moustache."

"Yes. Lost most of my hair." He flushed. "I wanted to call you, Diana. Tell you I was really the romantic."

"Why didn't you?"

"Would you have believed me?"

"Not when I was eighteen. But now? Yes."

"He shot Leon Ash. A rock'n'roll legend," the record producer chanted to a group forming around us. "A freakin' legend!" He still clutched his napkin, which was covered with marinara sauce or Leon's blood.

"I saw you play Uma Thurman's mother," John Hartford said, taking me in. "You are beautiful, Diana."

I put my hand on his cheek. He covered my hand with his.

"If only you'd called me," I said.

The police pulled up and got out of their cars. Without being commanded, John Hartford threw his arms in the air. It was a gesture worthy of the movies. Like leaving a poem on a table for a tearful young woman to discover. ●

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A scientific solution. As a dentist with a degree in bacteriology, Dr. Harold Katz has been keenly aware of the widespread nature of this problem. It was not until his daughter came to him about her halitosis, however, that he began to research the problem in earnest. His studies led him to an amazing

discovery about the source of bad breath: it does not originate in the digestive system, and the food you eat has no direct effect on your breath.

Certain foods, however, contribute to the production of sulfurous gases in the back of the mouth. Mints and mouth-washes intended to mask or prevent bad breath actually worsen the condition because sugar and alcohol dry out the mouth. Many common medications for everything from

high blood pressure to depression have the same drying effect, resulting in the formation of odorous gases. Mucous from post-nasal drip contains dense proteins that are full of sulfur. Some treatments for halitosis contain Sodium Lauryl Sulfate, which can cause canker sores. The only effective means of eliminating the sulfur gas production is to introduce oxygen to the bacteria, causing them to produce tasteless, odorless sulfates.

Effective, safe and natural. At his California Breath Clinic, Dr. Katz has perfected a five-step program for treating halitosis. By using these products on a regular basis, chronic halitosis sufferers can end their problem. The TheraBreath system eliminates the problem of bitter or sour taste in the mouth, improves general periodontal health and will even whiten teeth. TheraBreath has a mild spearmint flavor that tastes great and creates pleasant, neutral breath. It contains no SLS compounds, so you will not suffer from an increase in canker sores or any other side effects. These products are all-natural and simply introduce a greater amount of oxygen into the mouth's chemistry.

Try it risk-free. Try the TheraBreath System for yourself with our risk-free home trial. If you are not fully satisfied, just return it within 30 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked."

TheraBreath™ \$39.95 \$6 S&H

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Dear Dr. Katz,

Our son has had a breath problem for years. He tried mouth-washes and mints.

We took him to doctors and dentists, and even had his tonsils removed.

Nothing worked, until he tried your product.

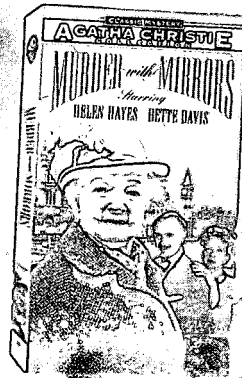
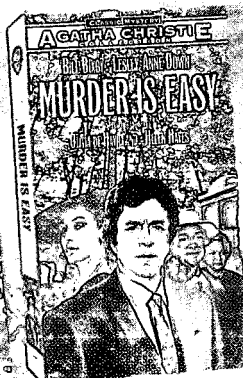
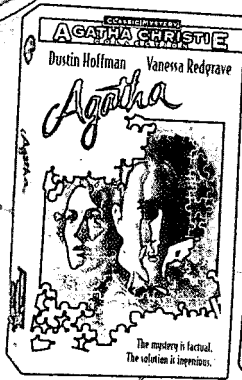
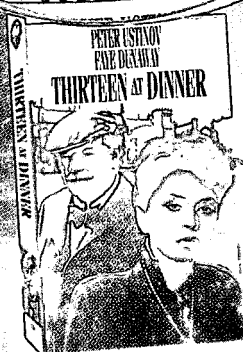
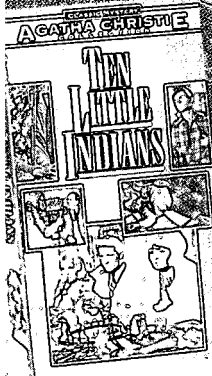
I am so thankful and thrilled that you found the solution to his problem. You'll never know how much you changed his life!

—M.C., Los Angeles

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